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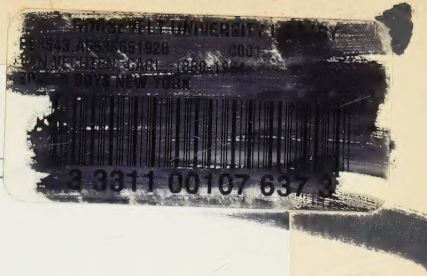

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Spider Boy

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Alfred · A · Knopf · Publisher

SPIDER BOY

a scenario for a moving picture

by

CARL VAN VECHTEN

1928

NEW YORK · ALFRED · A · KNOPF · LONDON

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Spider boy

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For
Blanche Knopf
with
Pansies and Kinkajous
and Love

"*Not seldom to be famous, is to be widely known for what you are not.*"

HERMAN MELVILLE

"*The city shall follow you.*
In these same streets you shall wander,
and in the same purlieux you shall roam,
and in the same house you shall grow grey. . . .
There is no ship to take you to other lands, there is no road.
You have so shattered your life here, in this small corner,
that in all the world you have ruined it."

C. P. CAVAFY

Spider Boy

One

Owing to the congenital diffidence of Ambrose Deacon, the unforeseen success of The Stafford Will Case merely embarrassed him. Before the production of this drama, to be sure, he had enjoyed a modest position in the world of letters. His stories of mail-clerks and milkmen had been accepted for publication with alacrity, if not with enthusiasm, by the editor of the Saturday Evening Post, and two of his one-act comedies had been performed on the vaudeville stage to rapidly cumulating returns.

Nevertheless, prior to the production of The Stafford Will Case, the world, artistic, critical, and social, had not exhibited sufficient interest in his mousetraps to make a pilgrimage, actual or figurative, to the home of their inventor. Now, however, he had suddenly become a figure of almost national importance. He had been photographed by Steichen for Vanity Fair, the New Yorker had run his Profile, George Jean Nathan had devoted an entire paper in the American Mercury to a discussion of his original talent, and the directors of the Theatre

Guild had besought him for another masterpiece. It seemed fairly certain that he would receive the accolade of the dramatic critics for having written the best play of the season and that he would inevitably be awarded the Pulitzer Prize. The ultimate result of these and sundry other flattering attentions was to frighten Ambrose Deacon half out of his wits.

Arriving in the metropolis from an inland state some fifteen years previously, he had held positions of one kind or another on a newspaper for ten years, until the stories he was beginning to write about the quaint characters he had known in his boyhood began to bring in enough money to assure him it would be safe to resign his reportership in order to devote himself to what Joseph Hergesheimer had so fittingly described as "a career of beautiful letters." Ambrose wrote without self-consciousness of events and persons that his memory had retained from the years he had passed in the small middle western town of his birth. Typing these tales neatly and dispatching them to plausible periodicals, he was fairly certain to receive a cheque in return.

It was his habit to write most of the day. In the evening, after a plain dinner at some quiet restaurant, Italian or Hungarian, near his home, some-

times he walked in the park, sometimes, although seldom, he visited a theatre, sometimes, more seldom still, he paid a call or received company. His friends for the most part were reporters whose acquaintance he had made in his newspaper days or visitors from his native town.

His appearance was congruous with his manner of existence. About thirty-six years old, he stood a few inches over five feet and weighed too much for his height. His light brown hair was beginning to fall away from his temples and the back of his head. His countenance was round, his complexion inclined to be ruddy. His nose was insignificant, but his mouth, a deep red Cupid's bow, was his best feature. In the depths of his steel-grey eyes could be read the record of his shyness. His hands were pudgy and exceedingly awkward. He constantly dropped books and other objects that he lifted. In the presence of strangers it was even difficult for him to retain his grasp on a fork. Moreover, he frequently stumbled over door-steps or nicked his knees or his elbows on protruding pieces of furniture. Many an ample doorway proved too limited to permit his facile egress. Although he was no misogynist, he had never married. Presumably no woman had yet found him attractive enough to try to gain his

attention. As a result of this condition he was shyer with women than with men.

He was fond of his work, fond of the few friends he possessed, although he cherished no ambition to increase their number, fond of his leisurely and modest manner of living. It is probable, had it not been for the unexpected success of his play, that he would have been quite content to continue to preserve his simple habits until the day when death might come to him.

Assuredly, the success of his play had altered the situation completely, but a nature more observant than Ambrose's would have noted even before that event a slow but consistent preparation for the general applause with which he was now being greeted. Certain of his stories had been recommended by the literary reviews as acute studies in middle western realism. A few astute critics had praised his knowledge of character, his ability to penetrate the lower middle class small town mind. Occasionally even his style had been approved as remarkably well adapted to his fictional processes, crude though it might be considered in the abstract. Furthermore, he had received many letters from the readers of the magazine which latterly had afforded him his principal source of income. These letters, to be sure, varied greatly

in tone and matter. There were illiterate communications which hailed him as the writers' favourite story teller. There were protests or words of approbation from inhabitants of inland villages who did, or did not, as the case might be, find that his work was true to the reality of small town life. There were letters from lecture bureaux advising him that the season for fall readings was about to commence, adding that his name would contribute lustre to any list of famous names. Whatever their nature, these letters should have served to warn Ambrose that he was in danger of achieving a broader celebrity.

With the writers of these letters and the authors of the brief paragraphs in the literary reviews, however, Ambrose hitherto had beneficently been spared an acquaintance. He read their effusions with a certain pleasurable glow, but they did not make him self-conscious. He had continued to write, as he had always written, out of an unfailing flow of memory. His early life had been spent among the curious characters of an American small town, and these had made sufficient impression upon him so that later he could recall their appearances, their conversations, with ease. Each had his story, his history, in many instances a chronicle of engrossing interest, which, in some cases, Ambrose, listener rather than relater,

recalled hearing told many times on the cracker-boxes at the general store, or on the corner before the drug-store, or around the stove at the post-office, with additions from month to month as death, marriage, child-birth, or some more unusual adventure befell the subjects.

So later Ambrose, sitting before his typewriter, let his memory flow through the keys. Were it a spring morning and did he happen to gaze out of his window to the street below to see a vendor with a pushcart laden with lilac blossoms, the vision was likely to associate itself in his mind with a long dusty road, a house enclosed in clusters of lilac and snowball and syringa bushes, and with the eccentric old woman living in the house, who, with her wagon and her mule, collected in barrels the village swill wherewith to feed her hungry hogs. He remembered how she went on with this drudgery long after she had scraped together enough money to send her son and daughter to college, even after they had married and gone out into the great world to live, and how, at last, when she died, it was discovered that she was rich enough to provide for the future of her grandchildren. That was all, but Ambrose would envelop this homely history in a wealth of vivid details and the woman with her hogs would arise be-

fore the reader of the Saturday Evening Post as a character he had always known and even always loved. There was assuredly magic in this and Ambrose's present difficulty owed its existence to the fact that he himself had been unaware of this magic.

When he wrote The Stafford Will Case he had employed as material the events surrounding a certain celebrated trial which had come up in the old town court, dividing the village into opposing factions, breaking down ties of friendship and marriage. He re-created the hypocrisy, the meanness, the drama, and the beauty of this sordid trial, reflected through the actions and words of the villagers in their homes, for, unexpectedly in a play with such a title, there was no court-room scene.

On reading the manuscript a prominent manager had at once sensed its stage values and had produced it with a cast and a director who had even augmented its inherent air of reality. The result had surpassed all expectations. Harold Edwards, the manager, had hoped for a modest success of esteem and Ambrose had looked forward to a slight increase in his income. Neither had foreseen the ensuing triumph. The first performance, fortuitously attended by a sympathetic audience, had concluded with so many curtain calls, so many lusty demands for the author, that both

actors and producer were annoyed to learn that Ambrose was not to be discovered in the theatre. The morning newspapers had proclaimed The Stafford Will Case a masterpiece; no less an epithet had been freely employed by the reviewers, who had further signalized their enthusiasm by writing long Sunday articles in which they had delved deeply into the motives and methods of the play. It was early advertised, for example, that Ambrose Deacon had invented an entirely novel technique, a technique developed naturally out of the characters and the situations. Ineluctable comparisons, indeed, with the folk plays of Synge and other European dramatists redounded only to the discredit of the latter.

Ambrose was bewildered before the interviewers arrived. Their invasion baffled him. It was simple enough, discounting the trifling hesitancies due to his shyness, to reply to queries which were merely historical or chronological in their nature. He managed, readily enough, all things considered, to tell the date and place of his birth and to give the correct name of the newspaper with which he had been associated, but when earnest young Harvard men peering through horn-rimmed glasses began to question him regarding the thirty-six dramatic situations, when they began to quote Schlegel and Freytag, and

to refer subtly to scenes in Werfel and Pirandello, whose plays he had never seen or read, Ambrose was swamped. He had no replies ready for those who asked him to discuss his method. It had never occurred to him before that he had selected a "point of view." Why, he had written his stories from the only point of view in which they had come to him, the point of view of the boy listening with wide open ears in the village store or of the boy who had watched them unfold before his very eyes. His play had developed in a similar fashion. He had written down what had happened, so far as he could remember, what his characters had actually said. He had been amazed to discover that his material was assuming dramatic form, shaping itself, without his conscious intention, for the most part in dialogue. He had not *intended,* in the beginning, to write a play. He had written a play by accident. To these interviewers then, who were bent on probing into his workshop, he was so completely inarticulate, so unsatisfactory in explanation, that their ensuing articles hinted in some instances at mysticism — The New Mystic Realist was the engaging title of one of these — and in others the authors pitilessly derided the playwright's clumsy efforts to maintain secrecy. Ambrose read these papers with growing alarm.

They had one immediate effect. They made him self-conscious. He began to wonder how he had written this play and the stories which had come before, stories which publishers, in the light of his present renown, had dragged out of old files with prayers for permission to reissue them in book form. He began to wonder if he could write anything new. Determining to test himself one morning, a few weeks after the opening of his play, he seated himself before his typewriter. He selected a theme quite easily from the ragbag of his memory, but he had no sooner decided on his first sentence than anxiety beset him. How was he going to tell his story? What form was it going to take? What point of view should he choose? This consciousness of processes, so recently acquired, produced in him so great a terror, so complete a realization that he knew nothing sufficiently recondite about these matters, that he found himself unable to tell his story at all. After a few such futile attempts to recapture his natural routine he was ready to admit defeat. Discouraged and disheartened, he faced the prospect of an involuntary sterility.

Meanwhile his fame increased. Callers, in the guise of worshipping admirers, grew more frequent, despite his alarming silences in their presence. The

interviewers, the photographers, on the whole were far easier to deal with. In vain he endeavoured to cultivate a more knowing manner; he was ignorant of any practical method of achieving this desirable result. Frankly, he was appalled by the social obligations his new position had forced on him. Edwards had entertained him at dinner or late supper once or twice and at these gatherings, which lingered in his memory like so many painful major operations, he had encountered other writers, actors, and even a few people from the richer and more formal social world. These others in their turn began to burden him with invitations. He accepted these invitations —he did not know how to refuse them — and hesitated awkwardly in the corners of over-decorated drawing-rooms whence he was sought out and pawed over. Nevertheless, his unseemly deportment appeared to have no immediate deterrent effect on the quantity of invitations he received. The momentum of his fame was sufficient by now to carry him along by itself.

Under the rays of this unwelcome searchlight Ambrose became chronically uncomfortable and unhappy, sensations enhanced by his apparent inability to write. He was beginning, indeed, to believe that he had walked into an impasse from which there was

no turning when among a heap of letters that the postman delivered one morning he descried an envelope addressed in a friendly hand. The letter was from Jack Story, a former reporter-acquaintance for whom Ambrose felt a real affection. Jack had long suffered from a complaint which the doctors at last had diagnosed as an advanced stage of tuberculosis and he had been shipped off to recover on the high and dry New Mexican mountains. The letter — the first that Ambrose had received from him since his departure — congratulated the playwright on his success and went on to describe the delights of western life. Jack wrote that he had found Santa Fe extremely amusing. The people were fine, the climate was delightful. In short, he was enjoying himself. He was not yet permitted to ride, but he sat in his warm garden by the hour, talking to a friend or reading, or he visited his neighbours' gardens.

I know, the letter concluded, how you, poor shy kid, must be overcome by the honours that are being dumped on your venerable head. What you need is rest and change. Why don't you come out here to get it? Ship on the Santa Fe to Lamy and a Harvey bus will carry you over the last twenty-five miles. I have an agreeable dug-out if you want to stay with me. Otherwise there are two excellent hotels. You'll have all the opportunity and leisure you want for writing — I take it for granted that every manager in New York is clamouring for your next opus —

and if you don't want to write there are Indians and mountains and good air and good food. Give the great Southwest a trial.

That morning Ambrose did not open his other letters. He sat for a long time before his desk considering Jack's proposal, so extremely timely, so sensitively accurate in its clear projection of his present state of mind. At the end of his meditations he had decided to go to New Mexico.

Two

On the Twentieth Century in his compartment — which he had engaged with confidence that it would assure him complete privacy — Ambrose reflected that his escape from New York had been accomplished more easily than he would have believed possible. His manager had come to the train to see him off, leaving behind as a token of farewell the huge basket of tropical fruits which now reposed on the opposite seat, but, on Ambrose's insistence, the newspapers had not been warned of his prospective departure and so no one else had appeared on the station platform. Nevertheless, Ambrose was disturbed in mind. He was doing something he didn't want to do because he found it impossible to do something else he did want to do. Voluntary action of a definite character was foreign to Ambrose's habit and his consciousness forewarned him that in his excessive zeal he had fled from one difficult situation only to seek consolation in the unknown, a favour that the unknown might refuse to bestow.

The steam heat was insufferable. His window already raised, he pulled the door ajar to create a

draught and the nipping February air accompanied by fine cinder dust blew through the screen across his face. The porter, on request, had adjusted a table above his knees and Ambrose had tried the only game of solitaire he knew, a game so easy that he found himself constantly winning, and it is only amusing to lose games of solitaire for only thus does one gain an incentive to continue. He had read the current issue of the Saturday Evening Post to the last advertising page; he had considered the plight of the poor farmer; he had reflected on the subject of Calvin Coolidge; he had even wondered whether there was a God.

Vaguely sensing a desire to write letters, he made his stumbling way to the club car, bumping his legs against the chair-arms of seven coaches, encountering passengers who somehow all looked alike, reading, playing cards, nursing babies, occupied as uninterestingly as passengers usually are. Opening the third door, he mused on the identity of the fellow who invented names for Pullman coaches. Was it indeed one man, or two, or three, or perhaps even a syndicate? This passion for naming things! Even telephone exchanges and toilets had to have names.

An amiable group had congregated in the club car.

A freckled fellow of middle age with red hair and white socks was joined in earnest conversation with a slender youth in black. The bulbous nose of a fat gentleman, inclined to apoplexy, occasionally shoved itself over the top of the New York World. A priest sipped at a pint of mineral water. At the further end of the car four men played poker at a table. Now and again, in answer to his bell, the porter strolled down the aisle to take an order. Ambrose seated himself in the unengaged chair before the writing-desk, removed a sheet of paper from the stand, dipped a pen in ink . . . and paused.

The fact was, he readily discovered, that there was no one he cared to write to, nothing really to write about. He was going West. That was all he had to say and he found he cherished no desire to say it to any one who did not already know it. He attempted to recall some special message that he might dispatch. None came to him. His play required no more rehearsals, no changes in cast. It was running with exceptional smoothness. He owed nobody money. He had, he reflected, no business of any kind that demanded negotiation. The immediate members of his family were all dead; he certainly did not intend to open communication between himself and his distant cousins. There was no romance in his life. Ac-

cordingly, he began to trace meaningless lines automatically across the sheet of blank paper.

He was startled from his distrait mood by a voice which asked if he would like to take a hand at cards. Ambrose was so embarrassed by this request that he refused almost rudely with a curt No. To be suddenly addressed by a stranger on a train upset him horribly, the more so because he harboured a vague memory to the effect that all such propositions made on moving vehicles came from the lips of card sharps and crooks. Moreover, he really knew nothing whatever about cards. Beyond his obvious ability to decipher their pips correctly he was unacquainted with their properties. Besides, he did not like the appearance of his neighbour, a man of about fifty, of gross build and florid countenance, his head set squarely on his shoulders above an inch of bull neck. The features were undistinguished. The fellow resembled a dozen men one saw every day — unless an exception might be made in favour of his eyes, grey-blue eyes, kindly and staring at the same time, almost impertinently staring. Their owner was dressed in tweed plus fours and retained his coat, although his white linen shirt was open at the throat.

Ambrose flushed as he withdrew his gaze and awkwardly rose. As he made his way back through

the long Pullman coaches he was conscious of a memory of a hurt expression in the stranger's eyes, a consciousness that puzzled him somewhat as he settled down once more in his own compartment. Alone, feeling more secure, he began a new game of solitaire, following this up with another, and another. Soon he was playing with no particular realization of his occupation beyond the obvious and practical fact that he was indubitably killing time. A little later he became aware, although his eyes alternately followed the cards or gazed almost unseeingly out of the window, that some one was standing in the doorway. Glancing quickly in that direction he recognized the stranger who had addressed him in the club car. There was something shy about his expression and that hurt look of a wounded animal still lurked in his honest blue eyes.

See you're playing cards, after all, were the words that dropped from the fellow's lips.

Yes, Ambrose replied. Turning up a ten of clubs, he placed it on a red jack. His fingers trembled as he dealt three more cards.

Why don't you play the nine of hearts? the spectre demanded.

Attempting to follow this excellent advice, Ambrose clumsily dropped his deck. In the meantime the

stranger had entered the room and now hovered directly over the table.

I wish you'd change your mind and play a sociable game, he suggested.

I'm just playing to pass the time, Ambrose stammered, realizing instantly that this was no adequate explanation for his conduct and wondering how he could ever rid himself of this interloper.

As if in direct defiance of this unexpressed wish, the man lifted the basket of fruit and set it on the floor, then lounged into the seat opposite Ambrose who nervously proceeded to deal out cards, playing his game in silence. At last, apparently, he could make no more moves.

You've got an empty space for that king, his unwelcome companion intimated.

Ambrose blushingly thanked him and played the card, but the pasteboard that turned up under the king offering him no further opportunity, he swept the cards together with so much violence that two or three fluttered to the floor and he was obliged to stoop to pick them up.

Are you from New York? the stranger inquired.

Yes, Ambrose replied, as he guiltily shuffled the cards, preparatory to laying them out anew. He

could not think of anything else to do or say. He was in such a panic that he was almost ready to pull the bell-rope which would cause the engine to stop so that he might demand that this intruder be ejected from the train.

I'm not, the man was saying. I go there occasionally on business, but my home is in the West. Kansas City. Maybe you've heard of the Abel Morris Company?

Dealing the cards, Ambrose muttered that he hadn't. His voice sounded hoarse and guttural. It seemed to him as if some one else were speaking for him.

Well, that's me. I'm it and it's me.

An apposite response did not occur to Ambrose.

Are you in business? Abel Morris began again.

No. Ambrose turned up the ace of diamonds and directly below it the deuce.

Don't forget the trey, Abel Morris admonished him.

Ambrose managed to murmur, You seem to be an expert at cards.

No, just keep my mind on whatever's going on, that's all. If I play cards, I play cards. There's plenty I'd rather do, but on a train there ain't much choice. I asked you to play with me because I liked your

looks. You can't be too careful on a train. Card sharps and all that. You've noticed the signs.

If still far from comfortable, Ambrose was considerably less perturbed. Yes, he assented, I've noticed the signs. You can see for yourself, he went on, almost, he was aware, as if he were apologizing, that I would never make a card player.

Oh, I guess you could if you'd keep your mind on it. It's all a question of keeping your mind on your job. You're not a teacher, are you?

No, said Ambrose. He found it impossible, as well as undesirable, to be more explicit.

Not a preacher; I can see that. Lawyer, maybe?

No, Ambrose repeated in desperation, his eyes on the cards, futilely, of course, for soon Abel Morris was inquiring why he didn't play the red queen.

If I like a man's looks I'm interested in what he does, Abel Morris remarked.

What Ambrose really wanted to say was, So am I. The words that issued unbidden from his throat were, There's nothing very interesting in what I do.

Everything any one does is interesting, his persistent neighbour averred, provided it's done up to the hilt. It's just a matter of *how* you do it, not at all *what* you do.

I do the best I can, Ambrose muttered.

That's not enough. You got to do better'n that. I bet you do too, except — Abel Morris actually dared a smile — when you play cards. You got that wrong, you know, letting down when you play cards, even a game of solitaire. That's the great secret of this life, never to let down. Do everything well you take the trouble to do at all.

With that he rose and ambled out of the room, a trifle self-consciously, but with no hesitation, and in his last glance Ambrose again caught that strange expression in the eyes which he now recognized as an expression of longing.

After the fellow's departure, the nervous necessity for giving his fingers employment no longer existing, Ambrose tossed aside the cards with a sigh of relief. At the same time he unexpectedly realized that there was something about this other fellow that was beginning to arouse his curiosity. There was a quality about his persistence which obviously set him apart from that professional class who prey on other passengers. Moreover, he certainly did not belong to that other merely pushing, inquisitive group Ambrose had encountered so frequently in New York during these past weeks. It almost seemed, on reflection, as if Abel Morris were searching for sympathy from a source which he recognized, falteringly, to

be sympathetic. It was far from Ambrose Deacon's intention to rebuff so honest an appeal. He was too sensitive himself not to feel with some intensity what he imagined the other must be feeling.

As the shadows deepened across the fields outside his window, he found himself more and more occupied with the problem of Abel Morris. In retrospect he regretted exceedingly his inability to receive him more cordially and the possibility even occurred to him of making a search through the train for the fellow, but this required an effort of will far beyond the modest capacity of Ambrose Deacon, the more so as he had made no opening for himself during their brief intercourse together which would give him a suitable excuse for performing this manœuvre. While he was meditating thus, perplexed and even anxious, a passing porter announced that dinner was served. To avoid the crowd, although it was only five-thirty, Ambrose determined to repair at once to the dining-car.

On this occasion, notwithstanding the rapidity with which he had made his toilet, Ambrose discovered that many of his fellow-passengers shared his theory about the practicality of early meals on a train. As he entered the car, walking in the direction in which the train was moving, he saw the back of a man or a

woman at each table ahead of him. The steward therefore was obliged to usher him to a place opposite one of these.

It did not exactly surprise Ambrose to find himself facing Abel Morris. His first sensation, rather, was a feeling of relief. He would be able, perhaps, under these circumstances, to make some amends for his earlier behaviour. However, as he nodded in response to the other's friendly greeting, he was aware that this procedure would be difficult. It was not an easy matter at any time for Ambrose to converse with strangers. In the present instance, his natural diffidence was re-enforced by the memory of their previous unfertile encounter. If bonds are broken, he acknowledged to himself in despair, it is still he who must break them.

Fortunately, Abel Morris appeared to hold no scruples against breaking them. He ordered his dinner with the hearty air of a hungry farmer and while Ambrose helplessly studied the menu, he proffered suggestions.

I've spent so much of my life on trains, he explained, almost apologetically, that I have a sort of instinct about what'll be good.

Ambrose welcomed this opportunity to exhibit his change of face. He accepted Abel Morris's sugges-

tions without a single alteration, the more readily because he was invariably at a loss as to what to order in restaurants. No amount of experience had seemed to improve him in this respect.

Soon he was amazed to discover that they were conversing together, dealing with commonplaces, to be sure, based on the news of the day, but assuredly conversing. Morris was careful to introduce no more personalities. Ambrose could see that the man felt sensitive about the encounter of the afternoon and had bound himself to be more cautious in the future. Presently the waiter returned with food and they began to eat together, always a means of bringing two people into close relationship. If Ambrose listened more than he spoke, at any rate he was more than monosyllabic in his replies to the information that Morris was a Republican and a Congregationalist. He had never, his memory reminded him, thought much about the tariff before, but he was as vehement as his new friend in his attack on free trade.

While they were talking Ambrose suddenly became aware that Denis Blair, an old newspaper acquaintance, was standing by his side, greeting him.

How's the play doing, Ambrose? Denis inquired.

All right, Ambrose replied, in doubt as to whether he should introduce Abel Morris.

Where are you going? Denis demanded.

Just West on a trip.

Denis appeared to be astonished. Well, you couldn't get me to leave New York with a success like you got. Why, the whole town's wild about you. I suppose, he went on more shrewdly, that's why you ducked. You never were much for fireworks. Do you remember that time old man Basket called you into his office to praise one of your stories? You went in as if you thought you were going to be fired and . . .

I remember, Ambrose interrupted, dropping his fork.

Well, anyhow, when you get through dinner meet me in the club car and we'll talk over old times, Denis suggested. He strolled on to the chair allotted to him.

Now Ambrose noted an entirely new expression in the eyes of Abel Morris, an expression of wondering approval.

I just knew it, the Westerner ejaculated.

Knew what?

Knew you was a professional man of some kind. So you're Ambrose Deacon?

Yes.

And you said you didn't do anything interesting! Why, you're the talk of the whole of New York! I saw your piece myself. You certainly can write 'em.

That's what I told you I do as well as I can.

Well, I guess you do it a whole lot better'n that. Abel Morris's enthusiasm was mounting. You're famous! Why, everybody's talking about The Stafford Will Case, even the barbers and the bellhops in the hotels. Everybody! I guess your name will go down to posterity all right, and how!

Ambrose sensed a curious emotional inflection in Abel Morris's voice.

I don't know much about posterity or care much either, Ambrose countered.

Don't say that! You know you care! You know fame means a lot to you! It *must*. Why, you've got something to leave, to leave to the world after you're gone. That's the great thing, to be able to say: Well, I guess they won't forget me!

Ambrose did not believe that Abel Morris would understand if he explained to him that he would prefer to remain anonymous, that he would be delighted if the world had never become aware of the identity of the author of The Stafford Will Case. He

contented himself by making a sign of negation, a sign, however, which actually implied physical distaste.

I can never believe you don't want fame, Abel Morris cried, shaking his powerful head back and forth, and adding, with a certain awe, You're a creator. You bring forth . . .

No! No! protested Ambrose. A vision of those Harvard men in horn-rimmed glasses haunted him again.

Abel Morris was crestfallen. There must be creation, he continued doggedly. God taught us that. What kind doesn't matter, but there must be creation. A play or a son, it doesn't matter. It does matter if you have something to pass on, to show posterity, to glorify your name.

Ambrose winced. Those Harvard men! The interviews! What did he know about creation?

I promised to join my friend in the club car, he reminded Abel Morris. Want to come along?

Abel Morris did. Only, he added, I want to collect some hooch out of my valise. Wouldn't you like to try a little genuine Bourbon? I've had it in the wood for ten years.

Ambrose nodded his answer. In rising, he contrived to upset a finger-bowl, a considerable feat of

virtuosity, he reflected afterwards, as he mused shamefacedly on his unmanageable body.

In the club car Denis Blair burst breathlessly into the relation of a lengthy story about how he had got into a jam with a girl — he called her a broad — and how his wife's suspicions had been awakened. Trouble loomed ahead. He wanted advice. At least he said he wanted advice. Actually he wanted nothing of the sort, Ambrose realized, recognizing the characteristic manner of the male who seizes any excuse to boast about the number of women who are infatuated with him.

As Denis concluded his tale, Abel Morris approached with his flask of Bourbon and the ensuing introductions furnished Ambrose a convenient escape from the ostensible necessity for comment. After a drink of Bourbon, however, Denis told the story all over again for the benefit of the Kansas City manufacturer. He belonged to that group of human beings who speak more freely to strangers than to friends, as if saying a thing once didn't matter.

Abel Morris regarded him with great earnestness. I'd clear out of it and tell my wife the truth, he said.

I can't do that, Denis protested. I can't sell out the frail.

You had no business to mix up with her in the first place, Abel Morris asserted with a great deal of heat, Ambrose noted. You got a son, you tell me, and there's his mother. I can't see . . .

We can't get anywhere discussing it, Denis interrupted impatiently.

Remember, Ambrose put in meekly in the interests of fair play, you asked for advice.

I asked for good advice. This advice isn't so hot. What have my son and his mother got to do with the case?

What's the girl got to do with it? Abel Morris demanded passionately. That's what I'd like to know. What's *she* got to do with it? You got to play square by your wife and . . .

Oh well, I guess it'll straighten itself out somehow, Denis replied flippantly. He yawned.

It won't straighten itself out unless you straighten it, shot out Abel Morris.

To put a stop to this futile discussion Ambrose asked for another drink and clumsily introduced a new topic. He was amazed to find with what intuition Abel Morris caught his intention and followed his lead. At the same time it was apparent that the man was making a supreme effort to control himself.

Presently Ambrose announced that he was going to bed.

Guess I'll turn in too, Abel Morris agreed. I got a good ways to go yet.

In silence Ambrose walked behind Abel Morris through the Pullman coaches, the aisles canyons of green curtains through the folds of which protruded now a man's socked foot, now a woman's buttocks, as the passengers prepared to retire in that indecent fashion exacted by American sleeping-cars.

Opening his door, Ambrose invited Abel Morris to enter, but the latter hesitated on the threshold.

I guess I'll go to bed, he said, but I want to thank you, Mr. Deacon. It's been an honour and a pleasure to meet you. You got something, you know, that I envy. You got a name, a name people know, a name they'll remember after you're dead. Posterity'll read your plays and see 'em acted. Now I haven't even got a son . . . to carry on *my* name. . . . That friend of yours, he's a creator too. . . . His voice was stern now. . . . ,He shouldn't fool around other women. It ain't right. Well, anyway, I guess it ain't none of my business. I just know how I feel. I guess I'll go to bed. I s'pose you're going to Hollywood?

Hollywood? Ambrose stared at him in amazement.

Why, of course, they'd be after you *now*. I thought that's where you'd be going.

No, I'm not going to Hollywood, Ambrose asserted with more firmness than was customary with him. I'm going to New Mexico.

Hm! Booked on the Chief?

Yes.

Well, I'll meet you tomorrow night. I'm only going as far as Kansas City, but I guess they'll have to take Abel Morris on the Chief if he says so.

He shook Ambrose's hand warmly and disappeared.

Three

The arrival of Ambrose Deacon at the Dearborn Station in Chicago coincided with a remarkable demonstration. As he neared the dingy gates beyond which the Chief waited to drag him westward he was forced to push his way through a cheering crowd. Hats were in the air. Flashlight powder exploded into a blinding splendour. Timidly, he questioned a policeman.

It's Imperia Starling, the movie star. She's on her way to Hollywood.

Her public could have been no more turbulent, Ambrose fancied, had she been on her way to heaven. He made her out now, on the platform of the observation car, bowing and smiling, with that taut smile which so easily may be transformed into an expression of malice, her unnaturally pale white face framed by her short black hair, her slender figure emphasized by her gown of white crêpe georgette, partially concealed by a chinchilla cloak. In her arms she carried what Ambrose computed to be about seven hundred dollars worth of orchids, not only the common catelya, but also uncountable sprays

of the yellow marshallianum, and a mottled variety that he remembered having seen on the coloured page devoted to these flowers in his dictionary.

The police had wedged an adequate path through the crowd, and following this, behind his porter with his bags, Ambrose made his way through the gate and down the long platform to his car. Determining to eat dinner in his own compartment, he dispatched his porter for the menu as the long train was pulling out, with the further request that he page Mr. Abel Morris. Mr. Morris, it developed, was not on the train, but a telegram delivered to Ambrose later explained that he had been detained in Chicago, gave Ambrose his Kansas City address, and invited him to be his guest at any time he found it convenient.

The rest of the trip I make alone, Ambrose vowed, but he discovered to his astonishment that he was disappointed to be deprived of the companionship of Abel Morris. There had been something quite winning, he reflected, about the personality of this financial magnate of the Middle West.

He ate his dinner in comparative peace of mind, wondering a good deal about Fred Harvey, as any one must who travels on the Santa Fe. Later, the

cloth and dishes removed, he tried a game of solitaire, but his mind wandered and without the beneficent assistance of Abel Morris he found he was losing the game. With a sigh he extracted from his bag a book by J. S. Fletcher. He read the last page, then the first, and finally peeped into the seventh chapter. This particular detective story, he decided, would not serve to hold his interest. Yawning, he called the porter to make up his bed.

In the morning the arrival of the train at Kansas City was accompanied by rain. The day, with the dreary Kansas prairie in prospect, was likely to prove intolerable. Ambrose dressed slowly and drank his coffee in the seclusion of his compartment with the door closed. Then, feeling restless, he ventured forth to stroll to the observation car where he sipped a split of Apollinaris. The outskirts of Kansas City, he believed on scrutiny, were more sordid than those of any other metropolis with which he was acquainted. On second thought he recalled that this was his consistent reaction towards the outskirts of any city he viewed from a train. The stenographer addressed him by name and asked if he wanted to send any messages. He considered a telegram to Abel Morris, but quickly relinquished the idea. An extremely pretty girl, who knew how to dress, sat

opposite him, swinging a flesh-coloured leg over her knee. To his confusion he observed that she appeared to be staring at him, that there was even a shadow of a smile in her stare. His eyes met hers for two seconds of acute embarrassment before he returned his gaze to the uninteresting view outside. An old gentleman entered the car from the platform, drawing a draught of chill air after him.

Want to play a game of cards?

It had begun so early in the morning! Ambrose shook his head weakly at the intruder, a pious, snivelling fellow of meagre build in a black morning coat. Surely a card sharp this! No Abel Morris at any rate: that much at least was apparent. Fortunately, the fellow did not urge him. Ambrose approached a table to fumble with a pile of magazines in their stiff black covers. He did not select one, but he contrived to drop two or three on the floor. As he stooped to recover these the handkerchief of the pretty girl fluttered toward him and as he rose he could see that she made no effort to conceal her annoyance when it was rescued by the elderly gentleman. Ambrose realized his innate inability to rescue ladies' handkerchiefs in these circumstances, even supposing he cherished the desire to do so. In a state of extreme

self-consciousness he left the car to walk the entire length of the train to the club car, passing porters making up berths, ladies in nondescript dressing-gowns, hairy-armed men in their undervests on their way to make their toilets, whole coaches of compartments with mysterious closed doors behind which, could they be thrown open, Ambrose was fully aware that nothing mysterious lurked.

In the club car Ambrose ordered another split of Apollinaris, fumbled futilely with another heap of periodicals, and thought more about the plight of the farmer, about Calvin Coolidge, and about God. Another inadequate stranger annoyed him by demanding if he'd like to make a fourth at bridge. Flustered, he paid the porter for his water and returned to his compartment. More solitaire, another book — this time he succeeded in reading seventy-three pages — occasional sterile glances through the rain-spattered window, unrewarded save by an uninterrupted view of the prairie, the snow turning to mud under the drizzle, with here and there an ugly farmhouse, a pitiful, gaunt tree, a lonely cow, and always the rhythmic accompaniment of passing telegraph poles. At last it was lunch time.

Ambrose regretted he couldn't enjoy the company of Abel Morris at lunch. That would be a protection

for, forgetting the danger of an encounter with the pretty girl of the observation car, Ambrose elected to eat this meal in the public coach.

The pretty girl fortuitously was missing. Ambrose, seated alone at a table in the half-empty car, scanned the menu. He thought some more about Fred Harvey. Fine fellow, Fred Harvey. Ambrose recalled that some one had once told him that Fred Harvey's dying words were, Cut the ham thin, boys. The boys had, ever since. Ambrose ordered ham and eggs.

I beg your pardon, but aren't you Mr. Ambrose Deacon?

Ambrose glanced up at the speaker to recognize him as one of the men who had stood beside Imperia Starling while she was saying farewell to her devoted Chicago public. His fork slipped from his fingers as he murmured a fragile affirmative. He was beginning to be more and more certain that he would have done better to remain in New York. Would the Indians of New Mexico, he wondered, behave in this obscene fashion?

Bowing, the fellow presented a card. Ambrose fumbled with it, dropped it on the floor, stooped to pick it up, rose, flushed with the exertion, and finally read: Herbert Ringrose, Director Invincible Film

Company, Culver City, California. Grudgingly, he offered a flabby palm which Ringrose grasped with cordiality. Then the director, uninvited, seated himself opposite the playwright.

On your way to Hollywood, I presume, was his opening speech.

No, I'm not going to Hollywood, Ambrose replied.

Frank disbelief was published on the countenance of Herbert Ringrose.

I know, I know. He uttered these syllables with an air of impatience. You can't be *too* careful. Have you signed with any company?

I don't know what you mean, Ambrose protested, and then added, No, in a guilty manner.

Herbert Ringrose leaned forward. When he spoke his tone was both confidential and portentous.

His words were: The *films* need *men* like *you.*

Ambrose's terror increased.

Call it an industry, call it an art . . . Ringrose waved such unimportant distinctions away with his hand . . . Why quibble? The writer is perhaps the most essential single factor — saving always the director — in Hollywood. Stories, stories . . . he sighed . . . the cameras eat 'em up. Swallow 'em. Creation, inventive genius: that's what we need. We

have to take what we can get, but a man of your calibre can give us something to put our teeth in.

I don't know anything about motion pictures, Ambrose reminded his visitor.

You've said the very thing that convinces me you would be a genius in their construction, Ringrose cried enthusiastically. Your modesty is positive proof of your potential ability. Too many famous authors go to Hollywood with the idea that they know more about pictures than *we* do. They want to reform the industry. Take — as Ringrose hesitated, rat poison was on the tip of Ambrose's prompting tongue — Maeterlinck. I've seen your plays, Ringrose continued. I've read your stories. I've studied 'em from every angle. Not film material in themselves, perhaps. Not enough plot. But what character! What human interest! Every line indicates you have an enormous talent for screen-work. You are a *creator,* if I may say so. Turn you loose with ME on a lot and we could produce a masterpiece. I see a mediæval castle with a moat, a chase of men in armour. . . .

But I never wrote anything like that, Ambrose interpolated.

You don't know what you can do, Mr. Deacon, indeed you don't know till you try.

There isn't much good talking about it anyway, Ambrose explained. You see I'm really not going to Hollywood. I'm . . .

Ringrose modulated his interruption to a different key: You know perhaps that Miss Imperia Starling is on this train?

Yes, I saw . . .

A good half of that spectacular demonstration you witnessed, *for which we were totally unprepared,* was in my honour, the director inserted. Miss Starling, he continued suavely, would not like to miss this opportunity of meeting you.

I'd be glad to meet Miss Starling, stammered Ambrose, but you see . . .

I'll come after you directly and take you to her, Ringrose insisted. Where can I find you?

I'm in A, car 407, Ambrose replied. He sensed the hopelessness of evasion: the fellow would find him anyway.

I'll be after you in fifteen minutes, the director assured him.

Left to himself again, Ambrose made a sorry effort to dispose of his cold ham and eggs. What was he going to say? What was he going to do? Write motion pictures! Meet movie stars! Men in armour and moats! What could the fellow be thinking

about? Paying his cheque, Ambrose returned to his room with a rapidly growing determination to leave the train at the next stop. He did not resume his game of solitaire or think about God or Coolidge or read the seventy-fourth page of the novel he had commenced. Rather he settled into a mood of glum despair in which he was still plunged when Herbert Ringrose appeared at the door.

Miss Starling, it developed, occupied a drawing-room in an adjoining coach which was emblazoned with the euphonious name of Zjickalfels. As they approached her domain a series of piercing shrieks, above which mounted a deep-voiced, vociferous Damn you! rent the air. The door of a room four yards ahead of them flew open and a maid in uniform, her hair dishevelled, tears streaming from her eyes, dashed out and disappeared around the bend of the further corridor. It was on the door that slammed behind her that Ringrose presently tapped gently, the while he whisperingly explained to his companion: Miss Starling is slightly temperamental.

A voice as sweet as that of Bernhardt in one of her more mellifluous moments bade them enter. The next instant Ambrose was bowing awkwardly as the director presented him to this celebrated woman.

She spoke, Ambrose was sane enough to note, with

a slight foreign intonation which he did not recognize. Perhaps she was Czechoslovakian or from Trebizond. The papers said . . . What did the papers say? He could not remember.

Herbert . . . the exotic product of America's fourth largest industry was speaking . . . do leave me alone with Mr. Deacon. I am sure we have so much to say to each other, isn't it?

Ringrose gracefully retired. Ambrose silently regarded his companion with rapidly increasing alarm. He was certain that he could find no single word to speak to her. The pupils of her extraordinarily lustrous eyes, the borders of which had been darkened by mascara, seemed to expand. Did she, he wondered, employ belladonna? She was dressed very simply in black, but her wrists were heavy with flexible platinum bracelets in which huge emeralds and diamonds gleamed. The pearls on her fingers and in the lobes of her ears were of an incredible size. Ambrose breathed in an indescribably pungent odour. She had never erased the ingratiating smile from her magenta lips and at last she spoke.

I'm afraid, she suggested almost coyly, you heard . . . you saw . . . my maid . . . Poor Elissa! she adores me! She couldn't work for anybody else. . . . Imperia was smoking and while she talked, she

fingered her shagreen lighter and cigarette case which lay in her lap. . . . In Hollywood, she went on, they say I am temperamental. Why? Because I cannot play a love scene to cheap jazz. The orchestra plays a banal tune. I stop. What is the matter? the director asks. I tell him I cannot act to such music. The music is changed. Another day I stop again. Why? Because there are visitors on the set. They spy on me. They spoil my mood. I go home for the day. Another day when I am dressed and made up they lead me to an open car to drive to location. I will not go.

You see it is this way, Mr. Deacon, my work is very serious to me. Besides, when I am joyous, I am joyous. Happy and carefree! I *love* the world. . . . She flung her arms wide. . . . I take pleasure in everything. But when I am upset I become a fiend . . . her voice grated and scratched . . . and I was upset just now. Very much upset. Fortunately it was only Elissa. I nearly killed an electrician once. You see I am always right and I am serious, isn't it? They understand me after all in Hollywood. . . . She was smiling once more. . . . They know I am only a child. They humour me. They pet me.

Ambrose wondered whether he wouldn't prefer to be alone in a cage with a leopard. He was quite in-

capable of devising any comment. Fortunately, he found it unnecessary, for this fascinating animal with ivory teeth went on at once:

How marvellous on this loathsome journey to meet a fellow artist! How grateful I am to have you for a companion de voyage! Your beautiful plays are always in my mind. They occupy the most important shelf in my library.

In two short sentences, Ambrose reflected, she had published and pluralized his comedy.

Ah monsieur . . . her pretty exhibition of dismay would have won a less diffident male at once . . . could you but know the difficulties with which I must contend, the louts, the clods of clay with whom I am forced to deal, the stupid scripts which are allotted me by ces sales cochons d'Hollywood! Director, camera men, extra people, ridiculous actors, all combine to spoil my pictures, to break the beautiful image I have created with so much thought. . . . She paused, apparently to admire the phrase she had wrought. . . . Next to the artist . . . she was pensive now . . . I think it must be the author who is the most important, but what authors they give me! Stories by babes just out of a newspaper kindergarten. Nothing for me to do! Nothing for me to do!

Tears appeared in the lovely eyes and rolled down her white cheeks. With some care to avoid rubbing the mascara she dabbed the moisture delicately with her handkerchief. Ambrose had been listening spellbound, fascinated despite his terror by this sparkling cascade of words.

I read everything, Imperia continued, *everything*. There is nothing I haven't read, but monsieur, I ask you, do you think Henry James is suitable for the screen?

She paused so long and regarded him so intently that a reply seemed to be demanded. Unreasonably, Why not? was the query that issued from his lips.

Ah monsieur, you are having your fun with me! I assure you that Henry James is *not* suitable for the screen. No more are most of the great writers. I've read them all, *all*: George Moore, Frank Stockton, Paul Bourget, Hans Ewers, Booth Tarkingstone, Sinclair Louis, Oppenheims, and Dickens. Not one is suitable to the screen. They wrote before the *artist* had developed the proper screen technique, isn't it? I had not yet appeared to show what could be done and they were ignorant. But the writer of today, that is a different matter. What an opportunity, monsieur!

Do you know, she demanded, turning to face Ambrose squarely, what my public is?

Your public? he repeated, bewildered.

She swept her arms out in a broad gesture, evidently a favourite with her.

My public is the world, she cried, the wide, wide world, and for eternity! Millions worship at my shrine. Millions wait for my next picture. And think, only think, the record lasts. Always, after I am dead, the public may see me live and move. This is your opportunity too, monsieur. Why don't you grasp it?

I don't think I understand you. Ambrose wiped his moist brow with his handkerchief.

How many people see one of your plays? A few paltry thousands every week, while *millions* look at my pictures, isn't it? And when your play has run its course, it is finished, except for the few, the very few, who can read it in the library. Think what would happen if you wrote for the films . . . wrote a script for *me*. There it would be always gleaming on silver screens all over the globe.

I wonder . . .

You doubt me? Her expression was ferocious.

Ambrose hastened to reassure her. You see, he explained, I don't know . . . I couldn't, he brought out at last.

Couldn't! Of course you can! Your modesty does you credit. You are a great writer, isn't it? Think of your plays, your masterpiece . . . The Shanghai Gesture! She flung it at him.

Ambrose flushed. I didn't write that.

You could have written it. You can write anything. I want you to write me a love scene such as no one has ever played before . . . a scene flaming with passion . . . but kind, sympathetic, sweet passion . . . a scene that young girls will revel in, a scene that will give them glimpses, poetic glimpses, of what love will be like when it comes to them. I see a Russian empress with her jewels, her fans, her laces, lying on a couch with an American boy . . .

But I'm not going to Hollywood, Ambrose found courage enough to protest.

Not going to Hollywood! Her face expressed astonishment in the grand manner. But of course you are going to Hollywood. Where else does this train go?

I'm getting off at Lamy.

Lamy? Lamy? Is that near Pasadena or Santa Monica?

Lamy is in New Mexico.

New Mexico! New Mexico! Her tone was replete with scorn. If you want mountains we have them in

California. If you want Indians there is a whole encampment near Culver City. There are orange groves and avocados and balmy breezes and acacias. . . .

But I am going to visit a friend. . . .

A friend! Who can be more of a friend to you than I am? I have made up my mind, she went on fretfully. Don't contradict me. Don't argue. *You are going to Hollywood to write a script for me, Imperia Starling.* I shall insist that Invincible give you a contract at once. You shall stay with me in my little bungalow at Beverly Hills. It is all arranged.

But . . .

I *insist*. We'll settle the details tomorrow. You are giving me a terrific headache with your arguments. I *always* have my way. Elissa! Where is that girl?

The door opened and a frightened face appeared in the aperture.

Elissa, my smelling salts . . . and a bottle of malt extract . . . and some rice wafers . . . and . . . she turned to Ambrose: Dear Mr. Deacon, you are adorable, and I shall see you tomorrow, when I am feeling better, to further discuss our plans.

Four

Imperia Starling assuredly had not been boasting when she had described her residence in Beverly Hills as a bungalow. It proved to be larger than many a pretentious Italian villa and generally speaking had been conceived in the style of the Tuscan renaissance, although there were indications that the architect had flirted with the Spanish, the Tudor, and the early American. The grey stucco structure, while it rose to no great height, sprawled over an immense amount of land and contained, to be exact, twenty-seven rooms. It was situated on a hill that might have been a mountain, surmounting a series of terraces, the ultimate one paved with irregular flagstones. The leisurely approach from the road below was accomplished by means of a long winding drive, sheltered and shadowed by palm, pepper, and eucalyptus trees. Parallel with the façade a row of orange trees in green tubs had been arranged.

It was hither that Imperia Starling escorted Ambrose Deacon in her Hispano Suiza after an astonishing welcome at the surprisingly tawdry station in which whistling sirens, floral pieces, fluttering hand-

kerchiefs, and cranking cameras had played their part. It was also at the station that Miss Starling's entourage had been increased by the addition of Count Jaime Supari, of Cuba, Herbert Ringrose had explained, while it occurred to Ambrose to wonder if Cuban Counts were papal. The greeting of Imperia and her noble friend was worthy of a close-up and actually received this tribute, four camera men grinding lustily in the interests of history. The Count, it was immediately apparent, regarded the presence of Ambrose with some suspicion, not to say disfavour, but after a hastily whispered injunction from Imperia he made at least a modest effort to be civil. At any rate during the long drive he relieved Ambrose of the responsibility of conversation — Herbert Ringrose had left them at the station — as he devoted himself entirely to the star, permitting her only an occasional opportunity to point out the passing wonders to her distinguished guest.

The first view of the bungalow was sufficiently imposing, but the sight of the line of footmen in plum-coloured uniforms, beginning at the second terrace and extending, suitably spaced, to the entrance, almost overwhelmed Ambrose. Imperia responded to their low bows with sundry queenly nods. She

reserved her effusion for a heroic figure which blocked the doorway.

Mama! she cried, as she descended from the automobile. Extending her arms with an enveloping gesture, she clutched the shoulders of the older woman and implanted swift kisses on either cheek.

Mama, Ambrose noted now or later, weighed nearly three hundred pounds and stood something over five feet six. She had upholstered this unwieldy mass in black satin which fell just above the appropriate ankles to support such a structure. Mama's black hair was combed in a pompadour back from her florid face, furrowed and puffed. Her bead-like blue eyes shone like little points buried deep in flesh. Her huge porous nose was more visible, while her small mouth pouted prettily above a chin that undulated indefinitely downward and inward. It seemed incredible that this flabby monster could have produced so exquisitely finished a creation as Imperia. Ambrose was further astonished to hear Mama speak with an accent unmistakably middle western in a voice not unlike that of a nasal foghorn.

The party entered a huge hall, hung with tapestries and Spanish shawls and oriental rugs, punctuated with Iberian chests, Moroccan ottomans,

Flemish cabinets, Empire commodes, and Italian refectory tables. Everywhere flowers bloomed, spikes and clusters of them, in huge blue porcelain and terra-cotta jars. The procession of footmen mounted the grand staircase with the luggage. Now there was a great sound of barking and a pack of dogs bounded into the room to leap on their mistress: cocker spaniels, police dogs, Schnauzers, English bulls, Airedales, Sealyham terriers, Dalmatians, Russian wolfhounds, Pekinese, Dobermann Pinschers, Irish setters, and Samoyedes: every variety of fashionable canine seemed to be represented. After, with many a pretty gesture, laugh, and mocking reprimand, Imperia had rid herself of their exuberant attentions, she led the group through a doorway to the brick terrace at the rear of the house.

I want to show Mr. Deacon the view, she explained.

The view proved worthy of inspection. First came the broad lawn, magnificently cared for, with clumps of bushes and trees and flowers here and there. Twenty yards away in the bright morning sunlight a great pool of surprisingly blue water gleamed. Beyond, the prospect spread out to an indefinite distance over wavy, feathery green tree-tops, tiled

roofs, and tall chimneys, to the maze below that was the city.

Imperia turned to Ambrose. Beautiful, isn't it? she asked him.

Wonderful, he replied.

It is my home, this simple place. Nothing pretentious, but still my home, and so I am glad to be here. She clung to the slender blond elegance that was known as Count Jaime. And now, perhaps, you will wish to be alone for a while, isn't it? There is much for me to do, always too much when I return from a vacation. Consider this *your* home, too. Mama will show you to your rooms.

Grateful for this suggestion, Ambrose followed Mama up the grand staircase and down a corridor to the apartment which had been assigned to him. There she left him, after explaining the meaning of a mysterious series of buttons by pushing which he might summon any one from a valet to a chauffeur. He found himself installed in a suite of two chambers, a sitting-room and a bedroom, off which a bath opened. His bags had already been unpacked and his toilet articles — such as they were — distributed in a neat row on the dressing-table while his clothes depended from hangers in the closet.

Ambrose sat down before an open window com-

manding a view of the rear terrace and the distant populated valley. At least he was alone, although devastated by worry and excitement. His situation seemed, somehow, to verge on an ultimate, inevitable horror. Could he have foreseen this future, assuredly he would have willingly remained in New York to face regiments of Harvard graduates with their esoteric questions.

He tried to form some clear notion of what had happened to him and how it had happened. He had made an effort — at least a mild effort — to avoid committing himself, but nature had not fitted him for argument with beautiful moving picture stars or their aggressive directors. After he had been dismissed from the presence — this phrase seemed accurately to describe the conclusion of his first interview with her — of the provocative Imperia Starling, he had been almost too fatigued in mind to analyze his sensations or to devise a solution for the predicament in which he had found himself. In the past he had not been called upon to struggle with situations which demanded argument. His life, for the most part, had been lived simply, among simple people who had not exacted obedience from him or attempted to invade the more hallowed precincts of his personality. Indeed, speaking generally, he had

been left quite alone to follow out his own modest desires. As a consequence he had never learned to say no with any authority. He had never even learned the infinitely simpler process, almost automatic with those New Yorkers who lead largely social lives, of saying yes to save time and subsequently forgetting all about the matter.

Reflecting now, it seemed to him that it would have been comparatively simple to leave the train at Lamy, while the star and her director slept, the morning after his disturbing interview on the plains of Kansas. He groaned as he realized only too vividly that such a procedure would be impossible to him. He had given his promise, a promise exacted by threats, to be sure, that he would go to Hollywood. It was not that he harboured faith in his ability to improve the quality of the output of America's fourth largest industry. It was not even that he believed himself capable of devising a scenario, however humble, for a screen drama. It was that he had been frightened, really frightened, into accepting a responsibility which in its future aspects wore a face that was no less grave because it was somewhat vague in outline.

It had been actually Herbert Ringrose who had secured his unwilling consent, who had set the seal

on the pact that had been tentatively arranged between Ambrose and the fascinating and compelling Imperia Starling. The director had visited the playwright soon after his dismissal from the royal presence and had, apparently from the beginning, taken it for granted that Ambrose had agreed to enlist.

So, you are coming with us to Hollywood! was his jovial greeting, an approach so disarming in its disregard of the known facts that Ambrose's lips had discovered no negative with which to combat it. As he had never at any time in his career considered the possibility of visiting Hollywood, even unprofessionally, or of writing for the films from any vantage point whatever, he was not fortified with arguments — supposing he had possessed any talent for argument — against this procedure.

Sitting disconsolately in this charming room, hung in gay glazed chintz, his situation seemed to be desperate. It came down to this: if he could not write his usual story or play in New York how could he expect to do better far away from his habitual environment in a line of work absolutely alien? Why, aside from The Birth of a Nation, Dr. Caligari, and a picture or two with Charlie Chaplin he could not recall that he had ever seen a film. He was quite aware, naturally, of the importance of the

industry. No one who lived in New York could long remain ignorant of the oft reiterated statement that pictures were growing bigger and better, or of the fact that cinema theatres were being erected of a size to compare favourably with that of the Colosseum at Rome. The amount of space devoted to advertising these theatres was staggering to one familiar with the prohibitive cost of newspaper theatrical advertising. Such paid publicity, however, had not moved Ambrose to visit the auditoriums these advertisements extolled.

He might have alleged quite truthfully, further meditation convinced him, that a sick friend awaited him at Santa Fe, a friend looking forward to his comforting propinquity as an aid to recuperation. He had, he recalled, offered this excuse, but it had been regarded as wholly trivial. Ringrose had logically assumed that his friend could wait the two brief weeks required for the development of a screenable idea. Ambrose did not believe he could write a story for the cinema in two years, but he had protested no further.

He had telegraphed Jack Story from the train that he was going on to Hollywood, and somewhere in the desert of Arizona he had received a reply: You poor sap, it read, you must be sicker than I am,

and it continued with a parody on the celebrated song of the marines which began, You're in the movies now. Evidently no sympathy was to be expected from this quarter. At the time the message arrived, however, Ambrose was so completely bewildered that its import did not sink deeply into his consciousness.

He had not known where he was going or why he was going there, but whatever small amount of will he had ever possessed had completely deserted him on this occasion. Herbert Ringrose had continued to talk plausibly in terms which conveyed nothing whatever to Ambrose's mind. So, almost without being aware of it, he had committed himself, and ruefully as he now surveyed his situation he was obliged to confess to himself that it might be worse. They would, he assured himself, discover in short order that he was useless for their enigmatic purposes and ship him away from Hollywood or forget about him so that he might escape. In two or three days, he encouraged himself to believe as he gazed at the sunlit palms on Imperia Starling's lawn, they will see their mistake and permit me to go back to Santa Fe.

Unfortunately for his peace of mind, he was quite unable to dismiss so lightly the affair of Miss

Wilhelmina Ford. Miss Ford was the young lady who had dropped her handkerchief in his presence in the observation car of the Chief soon after leaving Kansas City. Had she been content to commit merely this minor offence, it is highly probable that Ambrose would have forgotten about her, however perturbed he may have been at the time. Miss Ford, however, had seen fit to carry her campaign through to a triumphant conclusion. Her subsequent incredible behaviour, indeed, had served to strengthen Ambrose in his rapidly growing conviction that every one connected with the movies, even potentially, was a little mad.

On the afternoon of his second day on the Chief, Ambrose had taken advantage of a brief respite from the importunities of Imperia Starling and her equally exigent director to seclude himself behind the closed door of his compartment. He was, as has been suggested, much too bewildered at this time to form any accurate conclusion as to what had actually happened to him. He was convinced that he was either dreaming or drowning or being hanged. Possibly he was insane. There seemed no other logical explanation for the fantastic events of the past two days. They were, he attempted to make himself believe, merely visions, like the temptations vouch-

safed to St. Anthony, and as such, fortunately unreal. He would awaken presently to find himself in bed after a bad period of delirium, or, in case he failed to rise to the surface the third time, he would awaken in heaven or on some other mystic plane where he would at least be free of the nightmare in which Imperia Starling and Herbert Ringrose played such dominant rôles. Attempting then, somewhat vainly, to be sure, to console himself with these and other equally childish sophistries, he had been thrown into a new state of terror by a knock at the door. As he did not reply, going so far, indeed, as to hold his breath the more effectually to conceal his presence, despite the fact that the moving train was making as much noise as moving trains usually do, the knock was repeated, this time more definitely, a longer knock, a more determined knock, a louder knock, which resolutely announced that the knocker had made up his or her mind to be answered no matter how recalcitrant the knockee might prove. Ambrose, therefore, groaned, Come in.

The door immediately had swung open and whatever fearful picture his imagination had conjured up was more than fulfilled by the actuality framed in the doorway. There stood the pretty girl of the observation car, the forward flapper who had dropped

her handkerchief in an effort to capture his attention. Now she was smiling. He wondered why all the creatures smiled so continuously until he recalled the line about killing with a kiss.

At this juncture all rules of etiquette deserted him. He did not rise. He would have been incapable of this politeness at the moment had his visitor been the Queen of England and himself an ardent royalist. The lady, however, had not appeared to take any notice of his odd conduct. She had announced at once that she had been informed that he was the great author Ambrose Deacon whom she had admired for *years*. She had read *all* his stories and while she had not as yet seen his play — her residence in Kansas City had up to the present made this impractical — she had devoured the reviews and she had devoted an especial attention to the interviews which had hailed him as a new mystic. She had, it appeared, no kind or manner of doubt but that he was her oyster.

Her expression was so intent as she slipped into the seat opposite him — they *all* did this with no suggestion of hesitation — that at first he was fearful of a physical attack and accordingly was almost relieved to discover what she really required of him.

She had, he learned, always been assured that she was beautiful. Everybody in Kansas City *knew*

she was beautiful. They wanted to marry her, droves of them — practically all the eligible single men in Kansas City. Wilhelmina Ford — she had given Ambrose her name in the first instance — was merely bored and irritated by those protestations of admiration and devotion. While as yet she had travelled but little she had become aware, through her extensive reading and through an examination of certain portraits in the public prints, that men existed in the great world whose achievements and general personal appearance far exceeded anything available in Kansas City. This discovery, made not too belatedly, had set her resolutely against binding herself, or even giving a tentative promise, to any of the nondescript fellows of her acquaintance. She therefore returned rubies and diamonds by the bucketful, dispatched rich tributes of orchids and Madonna lilies to orphan asylums, and conveyed drayloads of boxes of candy to her less or more fortunate — according to the point of view — female friends.

Latterly her disdainful attitude had not found favour with her parents. They considered her — she was just past seventeen — at an age at which a girl should begin to entertain serious thoughts in regard to her future. She did not take the trouble to

explain her projected course of action to them, justifiably believing them incapable of discriminating between the men of her acquaintance and the more plausible males of London, New York, and Rome, save to the disadvantage of the latter group. What they really feared, of course, was that she would never marry at all and indeed it was quite true, if one reasoned by precedent, that a girl of twenty-one in Kansas City who still remained unmarried might be regarded as a spinster, a spinster with a few more chances, to be sure, but none the less a spinster. Discussion thereafter waxed warm. Her father and mother urged her more and more vehemently, and with a frequency which infuriated her, to make up her mind, to bestow her hand and heart on this one or that one. Why had she refused this rich attorney with his brilliant present and a promise of a still more dazzling future? Why was that pump manufacturer abhorrent to her? How could she find this utterly agreeable physician, handsome in the bargain, distasteful? She had no satisfactory explanations to offer. All she could do was to rely on tears and furious fits of assumed anger to postpone the event, to give her a few more weeks of peace.

During this recital the onslaught of words had been so terrific, the sentences had been pitched for-

ward so passionately, that Ambrose had sensed no obligation to comment. Now, however, she paused for an instant before she continued: The situation became so intolerable that I determined to put an end to it. I think, Mr. Deacon, it must have been you who gave me the courage to make my great decision.

Here, obviously, was offered abundant opportunity to express astonishment or gratitude or some kindred emotion, but Ambrose had found it entirely impossible to utter a word. His throat was dry, choked, almost as if it had been caked with sand. He had wondered, actually, if he could draw another breath.

If Wilhelmina Ford had been expecting a reply, she generously ignored its lack. Presently, she continued to explain to Ambrose that the reviews of his play had served to emphasize the high opinion she had already conceived of him after a perusal of his fiction. As for that, why else had she purchased the Saturday Evening Post each Thursday? When no new story of his had been included between its hebdomadal covers, she had consigned the periodical to the kitchen and the less limited taste of the cook.

You are not handsome, perhaps, she had assured him, penetrating his very soul with a long stare from

her violet eyes, but you have brains and character. I made up my mind long ago that while men like you existed in the outer world I would remain a virgin so long as I remained in Kansas City.

She had, it appeared, no reason to believe or even to hope that an immediate meeting could be brought about. Indeed it is likely that she had regarded him as a kind of symbol rather than an actuality of flesh and blood, a symbol of escape. The clearest fact in her extraordinary mind had been that it would be quite impossible in the present or the future — what small portion of future was left to a girl of seventeen — to discover any such paragon in Kansas City. She must, she had decided, travel. That, fortunately, was possible of accomplishment. Her parents were in affluent circumstances and she had long possessed an adequate bank account of her own. Flight then was practical, but flight with no definite end in view had seemed ridiculous.

Suppose, I told myself, I should never discover the actual man I am seeking, then my act would not be justified. It would be horrible to crawl back to Kansas City, to be obliged to acknowledge myself a failure. It was necessary then to invent another pretext. The insistent local harping on my beauty furnished me with a cue. It reminded me of the name

of a place where beauty is at a premium. I determined at once to go into the movies and I am on my way to Hollywood.

After a slight, if impressive pause, the stream of words cascaded forth once more. She had sought from her mother, in the absence of her father, permission to visit a married friend who resided in Pasadena. She had, indeed, no immediate intention of imposing upon this friend's hospitality, but in the few days she required to find her niche in the world of the cinema her deception would not be discovered. In the end her act would justify itself.

This then was the story of her ambition which, it appeared, had gained in impetus since her fortuitous encounter with Ambrose. Why, she had argued, should she not marry him now and avoid the notoriety and other distasteful aspects of the movies? He had, after all, been her first ideal. She might discover a better later, but he was good enough, certainly good enough to more than satisfy her at present.

At this point a long wail of pent-up anguish had burst from the lips of Ambrose Deacon, and he found himself suddenly voluble, if somewhat incoherent. He was already married! He had vowed never to marry! Besides what did she know about him? In the long run — probably in the short —

she would find him as undesirable as the men of Kansas City.

She merely smiled at these vapid objections, announcing that they were music to her ears after all the flattering ointment that had been rubbed into her excessively lovely countenance by the males she had previously encountered. He would, she assured him, eternally be desirable to her if he refused to fall in love with her. The extreme happiness she would derive from being the consort of a man of such distinction and fame would more than compensate for any lack of affection on his part.

However, she had continued resolutely, I've no intention of forcing you to take a step which as yet you have had no time to consider. As a matter of fact, she mused, as if the idea had just occurred to her, I don't insist on marriage at all. In any case, however, I can't give up the idea that whatever is to happen to me some sort of alliance with you will prove distinctly advantageous.

You are, she had continued, on your way to Hollywood. . . . Ambrose had shuddered as he had realized that he could no longer deny this. . . . I have observed you in conversation with Herbert Ringrose. I have seen you consorting with Imperia Starling. It is obvious to me that that sallow dame with a

brain like a fish-eye already has marked you for her prey.

Ambrose had opened his mouth to protest.

Don't contradict me, Wilhelmina Ford had cried. You may not even know it, but I know women and I know enough about this particular specimen, after a brief study at close range, to realize she has already sensed it would give her career a great kick if she acquired you in some form or other. I am not worried. I, and destiny, marked you for my own, long before we met. Think it over, she had added, rising. You are going to Hollywood. So am I. We shall meet again.

Ambrose Deacon's meditations on this extraordinary episode were interrupted by a hoarse cry of rage. Presently he saw the Count Supari, his hair dishevelled, dash from the house, followed after an insignificant interval by a splendid Ming peach-blow vase which cut a graceful parabola in the air before it crashed on the brick terrace. Next, the protagonist of this melodrama herself appeared, shrieking guttural insults in fluent Spanish towards the clump of shrubbery behind which the Count had prudently taken shelter:

Tu — cabrón, desgraciado, muerto de hambre, hijo de tu puta madre!

Now Mama emerged from the house. Seizing the arm of the incensed star, she begged her to refrain from further destruction.

I'll kill him! Imperia screamed.

Now, dearie, if you do that, you'll spoil your digestion. You can't eat your victuals after murder, Mama expostulated breathlessly.

Quite unexpectedly the tragic heroine became limp. Sobbing softly, she permitted herself to be led back into the house.

Five

Ambrose, awakened early by floods of California sunshine which invaded his room, rang the bell for his plum-coloured valet who prepared his bath and brought his breakfast. After he had dressed, feeling more light-hearted in spite of himself, he descended the grand staircase and strolled out into the deserted garden. It was very still save for the twittering of birds and the occasional distant moan of an automobile siren. The air was lighter than he had expected to find it in this semi-tropical climate.

Walking beyond the tubs of cacti and the palms, around a group of shrubbery, Ambrose was astonished to come upon an old-fashioned garden in which azure pyramids of larkspur kept company with balsam and geraniums. If, he thought wistfully, I could only remain alone here in this garden I would be happy and I could write again. Stories of my boyhood would recur to me. I should be able to work.

Almost immediately, indeed, such a story did arise in his mind: the story of Emma Flummerfelt and her dahlias. Emma Flummerfelt had been a familiar figure in his home village and he wondered why it

had never occurred to him to put her story on paper. Her father had been a baker, successful enough to buy a small house on several acres of farming land. Emma, when it became certain that she was not likely to marry, began to raise dahlias on a part of this land. He could see her now, her low bosom deflected over her corset, as she worked in a brown Mother Hubbard in her garden, a sunbonnet protecting her head.

Emma Flummerfelt began to experiment with dahlias when she was thirty. At the age of thirty-five she had become an ardent collector of these bulbs and an expert at their culture. She corresponded with all the known dahlia fanciers of America and England and exchanged varieties with them. By the time she was forty her garden during the blossoming season was one of the show places of the town and, through her assiduity in exchange and purchase, it had achieved an almost international reputation.

When she was forty-three a strange incident occurred. She was visited by a Colonel Redwood of Sussex, retired, late of some Anglo-Indian regiment. Colonel Redwood looked past the fat, middle-aged little woman in her sunbonnet to the glory of the garden and without hesitation made her a proposal of marriage. Emma Flummerfelt may have been

stirred by this belated attention, unique moreover in her experience, but she rejected the offer with dignity. As the story was told and retold afterwards at the grocery store, Ambrose gathered that the dahlias had been responsible both for the proposal and for its rejection. Colonel Redwood burned to own this splendid garden and Emma Flummerfelt could not entertain the idea of sharing this honour. Colonel Redwood had retired in some confusion, but as he walked to the station down the dusty, unpaved road, he had been observed to glance back longingly at Emma Flummerfelt's dahlias. It was not known that he had ever looked at Emma Flummerfelt at all.

When Emma Flummerfelt arrived at the age of forty-five, she possessed, or believed that she possessed, all the known varieties of this cultivated Mexican flower. Single dahlias flourished in great profusion, the small pompons in reds and yellows and magenta had a plot to themselves, while the great double blooms, striated and self-colour, many of them as huge as small cabbages, tossed their heads high in the air. Emma Flummerfelt had devoted herself so completely to her hobby for twenty-five years that she lived and breathed only for her blossoms and bulbs. Their care required her

complete attention. They represented to her her only excuse for existence. The neighbours, indeed, began to note a curious phenomenon: Emma Flummerfelt held conversation with her dahlias! She could be heard now whispering to them, now chiding them, now discussing local gossip with them in an audible tone. With infinite patience and no little success she began to experiment with the creation of new varieties. It was at this period that she produced the dahlia which has since become popular and staple: the Emma Flummerfelt, a variety which soon became her favourite. She showered words of love on its blossoms and was even seen to kiss them. Blue ribbons fluttered in from various shows, ribbons won by this hardy newcomer. Emma Flummerfelt pinned the ribbons on her Mother Hubbard and returned to her garden.

When she was forty-seven she begot a new ambition. She determined to accomplish that which no dahlia culturist had yet succeeded in accomplishing: she determined to create a blue dahlia, not a purple blue or a magenta blue, but a blue of the gentian or the larkspur. For several years Emma Flummerfelt worked to solve this problem, selecting freak flowers which contained a semblance of the sought-for colour and treating their bulbs with especial tender-

ness. After many discouragements she assured herself that she had at last been successful. She believed that when the buds of a certain plant opened they would prove to be tinged with sapphire. She attended this specimen with the greatest care, spraying it to dishearten vermin, watering it, fertilizing its roots, and searching the ground about the bulb for noxious grubs. On the morning on which she expected the buds to burst open, arising at five o'clock, she repaired to her garden to personally observe the thrilling spectacle. Towards seven, when the sun was high enough so that one might feel its warmth, her old father, now eighty-seven, heard her call not once, but again and again. As he drew on his clothes with some effort, her joyful voice came from the garden crying, Pa! Pa! At last he was ready to join her. Grasping his cane he limped with difficulty down the stairs and out to the garden. Twenty yards away Emma Flummerfelt waved her arms triumphantly while she shouted, Pa, I've got it! I've got the blue dahlia! She seemed beside herself with happiness. He hobbled on down the path to her side. Near-sighted as he was, he was not colour-blind and he had no trouble in discerning that the flower in question was a violent brick-red. Emma Flummerfelt was quite mad.

Ambrose mopped his brow with his handkerchief and sighed.

I do not think, he assured himself, that the story of Emma Flummerfelt would make a suitable scenario for a moving picture.

At this moment he became aware that he was no longer alone. A ponderous figure in white was careening towards him down the flagged walk.

Good morning, she called out as she approached.

Good morning, Mrs. Starling, he responded, thinking at the same time how much this ridiculous woman in her white dress resembled Emma Flummerfelt in her Mother Hubbard. At any rate he felt at home with her. She was his kind.

You're up early, she panted, fatigued by even this minimum of exertion.

I was admiring the flowers, he said.

Mrs. Starling sank to an adjacent bench and beckoned him to join her. I ain't so spry as I used to be, she confessed. I reckon it's my heart and all. 'Tain't so good any more. This is *my* garden. Imperia can't abide it. She likes orchids and suchlike posies. The palms seem to belong more to her. Why, sometimes on the train runnin' through the desert she goes wild over the tumbleweed and organ cactus, but she don't

care for pretty flowers like pansies and phlox and petunias. That's the kind I like best.

I do too, Ambrose agreed, feeling comfortable for the first time since he had left New York.

When I come out here I says I was going to have some plants like the kind I — we had at home. Imperia says go ahead, tell the gardener what you want and all and he'll fix it for you. So I did, and he did. We sent for seeds and cuttings and it began to grow like this. It ain't so much trouble as the orchids — I guess you ain't seen the hothouse yet — but it's prettier. Anyway I think so.

Where do you come from, Mrs. Starling? Ambrose queried, his heart warming towards this homely creature, lost, like himself, in this exotic locality.

I — we come from Ohio, Chillicothe, Ohio. It's more homelike there, don't you think?

I certainly do.

The sun don't shine so much, of course, and it gets cold in the winter, but sometimes I think I'll die if this sun don't stop shinin'. I wake up some mornings and I pull down all the shades and turn on the electric lights to pretend it's rainin' outside. Sometimes it does rain, but not often. Some days I get just crazy to see a snowdrift and feel a chill. Then Imperia

sends me up in the mountains in one of her cars. She gets back East two or three times a year to make personal appearances, but she don't take me very often.

The old woman sighed and then jumped.

What was that? she cried. I thought I felt a shock.

Shock? Ambrose repeated in alarm.

Yes, an earthquake. I guess not. It seems all right now.

Do you have earthquakes here?

Mercy, yes. Sometimes a couple in one day. They usually last about three minutes and I feel sick I can tell you. Sometimes the birds in the cages get knocked off their perch. . . . She sighed again. . . . Mr. Deacon, I can tell you that ain't the only kind of quakes we have, nor the worst. . . . She turned to him and spoke in a heavy, portentous tone. . . . Mr. Deacon, I'm glad you've come.

Ambrose felt his composure oozing away, but he replied with a kind of hollow heartiness, I'm glad too this morning.

You don't know, she went on, now in a mysterious whisper, what this house is like!

His composure was gone for the day.

She shook a pudgy finger at him as she continued,

Things are going on here, such things! It's nerve-racking, that's what it is, nerve-racking.

Still no word from the thoroughly alarmed Ambrose.

She ain't to blame. Imperia's a good girl, spoiled, but at heart a good girl. She's put upon too easily, that's all. *They* uses her.

This ambiguous they!

Some days I don't think I can stand it any more, and I plan to go back to Ohio. It's only that my little girl needs me that keeps me here.

Mrs. Starling was so overcome by her honest emotion that her voice had developed a tremolo and she remained silent for so long a time after this outburst that Ambrose felt constrained to find courage to ask feebly, Wha — at's the matter?

Mrs. Starling peered behind her apprehensively to make certain that no eavesdropper was in sight. Placing one chubby finger to her lips she whispered, Sh! Then bending towards Ambrose, she cupped his ear with her palm to ejaculate in a really tremendous crescendo, Matter enough! It's that Count!

Recalling the scene he had witnessed the day before, Ambrose recoiled.

I couldn't talk to anybody before you came. There wasn't nobody to talk to. . . . You see my

grandfather was an F.F.V., one of the best Virginia families. I ain't used to things like this. Imperia now . . . well, *I* didn't bring her up like this. . . . After all, she's the best-natured girl in the world and it does give you independence to star in the movies and make so much money and all. . . . This Count . . .

The effect on Ambrose of Mrs. Starling's incoherence was appalling.

This Count is in it for what he can get out of it, she continued tragically, once again peering about nervously, still apparently suspicious that she might be overheard. He's no more'n love with her than President Coolidge. Not half so much, I dare say, because Coolidge always goes to see her pictures and you can't see Imperia's pictures without loving her. Well, this Count eats his five or six meals a day and drives round in her cars. He treats her like . . . she hesitated while she searched for a competent simile but finally contented herself by adding weakly, mud. He's ruining her health and disposition. He's a lemon, a pill, a false alarm. . . . She paused to muster up a stronger epithet and then surprisingly burst out with it: a dirty bastard!

That's not the worst, she went on heatedly, by no means the worst! Again she leaned towards Am-

brose to confide effusively, He's no more Count than you are!

It cannot be said that Ambrose received this announcement with astonishment. He hardly listened to it, in fact, so bent was he on getting away.

No present opportunity was offered him to effect his escape as Mrs. Starling now firmly seized his right arm as she asserted, Here is where you come in!

I come in! Disengaging his captured arm, Ambrose sprang to his feet.

You come in, she repeated firmly. Sit down, please. I'm only beginning.

He obeyed her. What else, he demanded of himself, could he conceivably do?

Imperia likes you. She more than likes you. . . . Her emphasis reminded Ambrose unpleasantly of Wilhelmina Ford's remarks on this subject. . . . I know her. She'd never bring you here unless she had her eye on you.

She said . . .

I know what she said. She told you she wanted you to write a film for her. She does, too. That's her business, and if she had her way every writer in the world'd be busy writin' stories for her to pick an'

choose from and all, but don't you think for one minute she'd ask you up here to the bungalow if she didn't have something else in the back of her mind.

I'm sure . . .

So am I. Absolutely. Now here's what I want *you* to do: encourage her. Make love to her. Get her for yourself. Drive this cheap titled piece of cheese out of here!

Why, I don't . . . I can't . . . Ambrose rose once more to wildly cry out his protests.

You can. You gotta. It's only a question of time before she'll get you anyway, but let's hurry it up. Let's get rid of this lounge lizard right away. Yesterday was too much. Here she's scarcely come home when he asks her for a Rolls-Royce. His middle name is Gimme. The man has no feeling, no romance in his soul. He's just playin' her for a sucker, that's all.

Ambrose thought rapidly. I must go away from here at once, he announced.

You . . .

Ah, there you are!

The bright figure of Imperia in stiff pale-green organdie made an abrupt appearance. Ambrose perceived at once that she was frowning.

Mama, the telephone's ringing every instant and you know Manuel never gets messages right, isn't it? Do take the job off his hands for a while.

Mrs. Starling, obviously extremely ill at ease, approached the star and embraced her. Then she walked unsteadily away. Her age or some infirmity condemned her legs always to behave as though she were intoxicated.

How did you sleep? Imperia inquired of Ambrose in her gentlest tone.

Not very well. I think . . .

It's the climate. It does that at first to every one. After a week or so you'll sleep like a baby.

I think I'd better go, Ambrose announced.

Go! Why, you've only just come!

Yes, I know, but I think I'd better go.

Before you write me a story! I won't hear of it!

I think I'd better go down to the Ambassador, he urged breathlessly. I'll see what I can do there. I feel I'm imposing on you here.

Imposing on *me!* Imperia laughed. Nothing imposes on *me*. If you weren't here the servants would have nothing whatever to do, isn't it? I won't hear of your leaving. Besides you could never work at the Ambassador. It's full of people that would disturb

you . . . Auburn Six, for instance . . . Imperia glowered as she mentioned this celebrated name. . . . She'd flatter you and persuade you to write a story for *her*. I'm not going to let you fall for that blondined fade-out. The exhibitors are tired of her. She's getting less money than she got last year.

I never heard of Auburn Six. I . . .

You'll stay *here,* I tell you. . . . Now a note of petulant command was noticeable in the actress's voice. . . . In a week or so I'll take you up to talk to Lee Schwarzstein: he's the general manager of Invincible, you know.

A week or so!

At least. I'm sorry, but he's the busiest man in Culver City. We can't make an appointment before then.

But I've got to go to New Mexico. If dismay were written across Ambrose's face, he also knew that this would be his last weak protest, that he was incapable of making any move in defiance of the wishes of the domineering personality who stood beside him.

I thought we'd been all over that. . . . Imperia was becoming impatient. She brightened, however,

as she rapidly went on: Now I just can't bother with you today. I'm much too busy. I have an appointment with Schwarzstein at twelve. That'll keep me an hour. I must have tests made. I have rendezvous with the photographer and the dressmaker. A man from Photoplay is coming to interview me cooking in the kitchen. Tonight there's a preview. . . . Well, you can see I'm busy. Tomorrow I'll try to get together a dinner party for you. Today, work on my story if you feel like it. Schwarzstein's sure to buy anything you write. Or take out one of the cars. I have twelve: Pierce-Arrow, Marmon, Chrysler 80, Packard, Lincoln . . . whichever you prefer. I use the Hispano. Can you drive?

No.

It doesn't matter. There are two chauffeurs. If you do go out, remember that our climate is treacherous. Always carry an overcoat to wear in the shade or you'll catch cold. Why don't you drive down to the Casa del Mar at the beach? Or stay at home and read or sleep or stroll around in the garden. Whatever you like, but . . . her brow darkened again . . . *don't talk too much to Mama.* Mama means well, but she's a fool.

A new presence made itself felt in the garden, a

presence which caused a complete alteration in Imperia's manner.

Jaime! Yes, I'll come with you at once.

She playfully reached for the Count's arm and the two disappeared behind the shrubbery.

Ambrose mopped his brow.

Six

A little before eight Ambrose appeared in the drawing-room only to find it completely deserted, but the crystal chandeliers were ablaze with light and there were flowers everywhere, crimson and saffron roses, Madonna lilies nodding on their long stalks, great clusters of pale-purple orchids. An orchestra on the brick terrace was playing Sometimes I'm Happy. Feeling infinitely depressed, Ambrose lighted a cigarette.

While he had been dressing for dinner he had requested his valet to bring him three cocktails. He wondered now if he dared ask for another. Why not? he demanded boldly and aloud, as he crossed the room to press a button.

After he had gulped down his fourth cocktail he began to feel less anxiety about his social début in Hollywood and was even prepared to face Mama who now descended the stairs. She was bravely caparisoned in mauve satin. Around her throat hung a gold chain while two heavy Victorian gold bracelets encircled her chubby wrists. After his encounter with Mama in the garden the previous morning he

had not seen her again till nearly evening and even then at a distance. She had stood in one of the large bow-windows of the upper storey and stared at him below on the lawn. Presently she had indulged in a series of extraordinary gestures, apparently fraught with a sinister meaning, but quite incomprehensible to Ambrose.

Now, approaching him, she held a warning finger to her lips, whispering melodramatically, Sh! We must be careful. Imperia suspects.

Ambrose was quite willing to be careful. He hoped this injunction included the assurance that Mama would share no more confidences with him. He required another cocktail and offered one to Mrs. Starling.

I daren't take more than a little sip, Mama explained.

Where is Miss Starling, Ambrose inquired.

Oh, she won't be ready for hours. She's always late. That's why all the others are late too. They know Imperia.

Who is coming?

I don't know, Mama replied, sipping her cocktail. I really don't know. Then waving her hand aimlessly, she added vaguely, Oh, everybody!

Herbert Ringrose was fortuitously the first to arrive and he joined Ambrose at once.

I came early to look out for you, he said. I knew Imperia would never be down.

Ambrose thanked him for his solicitude.

Well, Ringrose continued effusively, getting to be quite a citizen, aren't you? We'll be taking you up to see Schwarzstein now in a few days and have you sworn in regularly as a deputy sheriff.

Other guests straggled in. Some of the men were extremely handsome, at least as handsome as the models who posed to advertise golf clothes, Ambrose thought. Others, surprisingly, were more rugged in appearance. The women, however, were all of an epic pulchritude, some clad in indescribably fantastic garments, blazing with jewels, some, perhaps to attract attention, garbed in the extreme of simplicity without any jewels at all. As they entered they were introduced to him and each made some pretty speech about his play, although not one of them, apparently, had seen it. Absolutely ignorant of this strange world, he was not able to reciprocate with any definiteness. Smiling nervously through the ordeal, for the most part he remained silent.

He noted that the men formed a group in one corner of the room, a group which partook freely of the cocktails now passed about by the dozens on trays. Ambrose himself was not laggard in this respect. The ladies, on the other hand, did not appear to be drinking. They had congregated in another corner where, to judge by their whispering and laughter, they were indulging in gossip.

Ambrose, always more or less in the company of Herbert Ringrose, listened in amazement to a language which he could scarcely understand, composed as it was of words like rushes, retakes, previews, and location. In wild-eyed wonder he listened to a report of an incident of the day. It seems that some stunt man, whatever that might be, had agreed to ride a bicycle from a platform through an open freight-car while the train was moving at full speed. He was to receive twenty-five dollars for this hazardous undertaking.

We'll have to kill about six of 'em before we get the shot, remarked the informer who, Ambrose gathered, was a director.

Fortified by gin, Ambrose asked a question of Ringrose.

Lord no! that one replied. It's just to double for a comic in a custard pie opus. You can get all the

men you want to throw themselves out of a twelfth storey window for the price of the rent of a room in a hospital. I hope you'll give Imperia some nice snappy stuff like that for her film. Say she has been driven by the villain to climb a ninety-foot pine-tree and escapes by clinging to the wing of a passing aeroplane.

Would she do that? the trembling Ambrose demanded, in awe of such potential prowess.

Ringrose and his friend roared with laughter.

Hell no! Some stunt woman would double for her, explained the comedy director.

You mean ten will, for a stunt like that, inserted a comely actor. Good thing too. They like it. The more that's killed, the less competition.

There's too much competition all over the place, remarked another actor. Why, there must be at least seven thousand guys peddling the bush.

The place is beginning to look like a synagogue on Yom Kippur, said Ringrose.

They all roared.

The comely actor grew confidential. Have you seen my new picture? he inquired of Ambrose.

Ambrose knew neither the name of the actor nor of the film, but he was quite within the bounds of truth

when he replied negatively. He had seen no new pictures.

You must. It's great. I had my way at last and I've put over a success. Unless I watch all the time these hams will ruin everything.

Come over to the lot and watch me work, urged the comedy director. You'll learn more about films that way than any of these other birds can teach you.

The comely actor scowlingly withdrew.

There were more cocktails.

Suddenly there was a startling change in the music. The band had been playing a fox-trot, but the rhythm shifted unexpectedly to waltz tempo. Now Ambrose noted that every one in the room had turned to face the staircase. Imperia was making her entrance.

She wore a corslet of soft blue feathers from which fell countless yards of grey chiffon, cut off short in jagged points just below the knee, but dragging far behind. Her black hair was combed straight back from her perfectly white face, slit by her vivid carmine lips. Her wide-spread fan was of silver lace.

The entrance of Imperia was the signal for the announcement that dinner was served and the group filed into the dining-room. Ambrose found his place

at Imperia's right. On her left he was not surprised to discover Count Jaime Supari. On his own right was seated an amazing creature with a very white face, mysterious green eyes, and coils of pink hair arranged in a coronet about her head. He recalled that she had been introduced as Mrs. Norvell. Could this be Ariane Norvell, the author of Love Is Too Much?

He learned that it was.

Mrs. Norvell without hesitation plunged at once into a monologue, speaking in a calm, monotonous voice, her lips scarcely moving, except occasionally to permit a suspicion of a smile to flicker across them: They are drinking too much. They are smoking too much. Slaves! Slaves! I shall never become a slave. I hate slaves. One is obliged to decide whether to live for the moment or to become immortal. I have chosen to become immortal. I shall leave behind me a message to make ten million people better, ten million people happier. Recently I reread Love Is Too Much. A masterpiece, Mr. Deacon, a beautiful, immortal masterpiece!

I do not smoke, Mr. Deacon. I do not drink. Externally I am like ice. To protect myself I have created this perpetually frozen surface which no one can break through. That is why I always wear ermine

and emeralds. Inside, of course, I am seething with personality, but *it belongs to me*. No one else can touch it. But they can recognize it. They can know that it is there. That is why fifty thousand people cheered me when I passed through New York recently.

I am fifty, Mr. Deacon — think of it, fifty! — but I shall look younger every year because I possess an immortal soul. Look at these poor girls! In two short years their skins will begin to sag, bags will appear under their eyes. They will not last, because they have no souls. Poor weak moths, they live but for the instant. Only I, Ariane Norvell, am immortal.

Having made this quite considerable speech, Mrs. Norvell did not speak again. Ambrose had drunk so many cocktails that he had succeeded in conquering his nervousness and he listened listlessly to the lady while he was eating. He found her words a soothing accompaniment to his dinner. Her silence was equally undisturbing.

This is your party, Mr. Deacon, Imperia interrupted her animated conversation with Jaime long enough to tell him.

After the soup course, champagne was served, but Ambrose, glancing down the table laid with gold

service, observed that none of these women drank very much. Beyond the heavily carved gold candelabra and the gold epergne from which emerged sprays of lily of the valley, he could see that an air of self-conscious formality, a rather studied gaiety hovered over the group. The women, indeed, seemed to fear that they might get mussed. The men were more animated. A strange fellow with a face like an old Greek coin was picking his nose with evident enjoyment. One fact impressed Ambrose more and more: such scraps of conversation as his ear managed to take in all apparently began with the singular personal pronoun. He never heard the word we.

Dinner over at last, on the way out Ambrose found himself by the side of an extremely pretty blonde.

I saw your play in New York last week, Mr. Deacon, she was saying, and I loved it.

Ambrose had had enough to drink so that he felt equal to the occasion.

You must be one of the most successful of the stars, he said, you're so beautiful.

The lady laughed. I'm not a star at all, she explained. My name is Capa Nolin. I write stories for pictures.

Stories for pictures! They want me to do that.

Well, of course you will . . .

I can't. I don't know the first thing about how to begin.

Oh, it's very easy, especially if you write for Imperia. The only important thing to remember is to make plenty of opportunities for close-ups. Even that really doesn't matter. The director can put them in. You see Imperia always counts her close-ups when she sees the rushes and if the percentage isn't high enough she leaves the lot. As for the story, that's too simple. Imperia always uses the same story.

What's that?

You're sure to see it tonight.

What do you mean? He regarded her absolutely uncomprehendingly.

She laughed again. Her latest film: Golden Dreams.

But I didn't know it was released.

Oh, she'll show it on the screen here in the drawing-room. Is this your first Hollywood party? You'll soon find out that the stars always show their latest films when they give dinners.

I didn't know. It *is* my first party. You see I never saw anybody here before except Miss Starling and her mother, and Herbert Ringrose, and I've only known them a few days.

Imperia's *mother!* The girl shrieked with radiant laughter.

Isn't she?

She's her *Mama.* That's quite different. All the unmarried women stars in Hollywood have mamas; some even have mothers. It's a convention. The curious thing is that none of 'em have fathers. Look at Scandia Cortland, she went on, nodding towards a girl with eyes like pools of violet ink. You should meet *her* mama. She's got the prize of the lot. Scandia's Norwegian, but her mama can't speak Norwegian. She can't even speak English.

What does she speak?

Brooklynese. . . . The faintly amused expression on Capa Nolin's face became exaggerated. Watch Imperia, she suggested. She knows we're talking about her. She would know it even if we were really talking about some one else.

Who is the man with the glasses beside her? Ambrose demanded.

Capa Nolin laughed again. He would die, she said, if he knew anybody had asked that question. Didn't you ever hear of Livermore Bode?

Can't say I have.

Good God!

You see . . .

I understand, but *he* wouldn't. He's the greatest director in the world. He says so himself.

Is he with Invincible?

The girl laughed louder. Really, she remarked, you must come to see me so that I can give you lessons about local celebrities. You'll find, Mr. Deacon, that I'm more frank than the others. They say I'm indiscreet. I suppose I am. Anyway I must tell you all about us. You see we're all supposed to be international and it hurts when people don't recognize us.

I hope I didn't hurt *you,* Ambrose protested.

Really, Mr. Deacon, you are too delicious, Capa Nolin cried. I just can't laugh any more. You couldn't hurt me. I don't take anything out here seriously, not even myself. You see, she went on soberly, most of the houses out here are made of stucco. You can kick your foot right through them. You can kick your foot through everything else here too. Nothing is real, except the police dogs and the automobiles, and usually those aren't paid for. To be concrete, there are no stenographers at the studios: they're all *secretaries.*

Ambrose's eyes widened. It's all so extraordinarily different, Miss Nolin.

Different! You'd better believe it is. There's

Ritchie Cahill, for instance, who gets moody and leaves his director and cast flat while he sits in his dressing-room listening to a phonograph record of Dvořák's Humoresque. And there's Lucas Finsilver who is always properly dressed. He can't even sit before his writing-desk to write a letter unless he is correctly attired in a writing-suit. And there's Agra Bellaire who recently told me that her newly decorated boudoir was just a petit morceau de Chinese. And . . .

Imperia was crying to the group: There's ping-pong and dancing and bridge and tennis and bathing, but who wants to see my new picture?

The clamorous insistence to see the picture would have satisfied any star.

Tennis and swimming at night? Ambrose queried of his companion.

Yes, she replied, the court is artificially lighted and the water in the pool is artificially heated. It's artificially coloured too.

I think you'll like *my* Golden Dreams, Ambrose heard a voice say in his ear. He turned to find Herbert Ringrose by his side.

Footmen lowered a silver screen over one wall of the room, while other servitors arranged chairs at the opposite end. The company disposed itself as

comfortably as possible, the lights were extinguished, and the picture was projected. It exposed the story of a poor shop girl who accepted money from men but who unaccountably never seemed to lose her virtue. She wore an unending series of the most astonishing frocks to the most astonishing affairs and yet always appeared behind the counter the next morning as if fourteen dollars a week was an important factor in her life. One young fellow in particular seemed to make his home in her bedroom and yet it was plain that nobody but the chaste heroine ever occupied the bed. In the end, when she married this persistent suitor, the fact that she was the long-lost daughter of a German baroness was disclosed. Concurrently a wicked floor-walker was completely confounded.

The applause was hearty at the conclusion of the showing.

Your best picture, Imperia! You've never done anything like it before! Great stuff, Herbert, those shots from the transom! These were a few of the comments.

Don't you think you could write that? Capa Nolin demanded. It's the story I was telling you about. Imperia never uses any other.

Ambrose tossed down another glass of cham-

pagne — a footman with a tray of filled glasses always seemed to be at his elbow — and admitted that it seemed possible that he could.

Mr. Deacon . . .

He turned.

I'm Auburn Six, a lovely creature announced. I was overlooked during the introductions.

The beauty of Auburn Six — if anything so thoughtful could justifiably be called beauty — was less flamboyant than that of some of the other picture stars in the room. Her face was almost sad, certainly wistful, framed in masses of curly yellow hair. She was wearing a very simple dress of pale-violet chiffon. Ambrose was able, even without having seen one of her pictures, to congratulate her on her talent.

Oh, what I do is nothing, she protested. Don't speak of it, please. I'm only out here to make money, she informed him unexpectedly. I suppose you are too.

Her manner was a contradiction of her rather fragile appearance. She seemed as forthright as Capa Nolin and even more sympathetic.

I don't know why I'm out here, Ambrose replied lamely. Ringrose and Miss Starling persuaded me to come. They insist I talk to Schwarzstein.

By the time you sign a contract with Schwarzstein you'll be an old man, Auburn Six assured him.

What do you mean? There was a hopeful gleam in Ambrose's eye.

Haven't you heard how busy Schwarzstein is? Auburn Six selected a cigarette from a bowl of dried rose petals.

Ambrose wondered if he had.

He's the busiest man in Culver City. He's too busy to see you in a couple of years.

I want to go home. Ambrose announced suddenly. I never wanted to come out here at all. I don't know a thing about pictures. They dragged me here, he protested. Then, Where's everybody gone?

The room, indeed, appeared to be, but for them, entirely deserted. Ambrose turned to a tray of filled champagne glasses that remained on the piano. As he lifted one of these to his lips he was aware that Auburn Six was regarding him with a peculiar intensity.

If you don't know anything about pictures, she was saying, you ought to be better than any scriptwriter out here. Everybody's looking for a writer who admits he doesn't know anything about pictures, at least they say they are. It's certain that all

the writers out here at present know far too much about pictures.

That's what they said to me, Ringrose, Miss Starling. They told me that. Ambrose spoke breathlessly.

They thought they meant it too. . . . Auburn Six was pondering. . . . I really don't see why Invincible deserves to get you, she went on after a considerable pause.

They won't, he said firmly, helping himself to another glass of wine. I'm going to New Mexico to see Jack Story. That's settled.

He was amazed at his own display of courage.

I could get you a contract tomorrow, I'm almost sure. Auburn Six spoke as if she were thinking aloud.

I can't write a scenario. I don't know anything about pictures.

I'm sure you could.

I can't . . .

I know. I like your modesty. Are you locked up here?

Locked up?

Does Imperia watch you?

She's been gone for two days.

Good. I'll stop for you tomorrow and drive you over to the L.L.B. lot. I want you to talk to Ben Griesheimer.

I don't want to talk to anybody. Who's Ben Griesheimer?

He's the head man at L.L.B. That's my lot. On second thought I'd better not stop for you. . . . Imperia might ask questions. You can pick me up at the Ambassador, but don't use Imperia's car. Call a taxi.

Call a taxi?

Yes, tomorrow at eleven. I'll make the appointment with Griesheimer. He'll always make time to see any one important. Are you set?

I want to go home.

Mr. Deacon, you'll never get home unless you follow my advice. Imperia won't let you go until you see Schwarzstein and I assure you that Schwarzstein will keep you hanging around here for months.

I want to go home, Ambrose repeated doggedly.

Auburn Six laughed. Mr. Deacon, you are delicious. I wish we had more men of your temperament out here. We'll send you home on the first train after you've seen Griesheimer. He'll sign you up and then you may go to Asia or anywhere you please to write your story.

I don't want to go to Asia. I want to go to New Mexico to see my friend.

Well, that's all the better: only a day from here.

You think he'll let me do that.

Without any doubt.

I'll come for you at eleven, Ambrose agreed in desperation.

Promise?

Promise.

At precisely this instant a glowering Imperia, in a one-piece, white silk bathing-suit, appeared in the doorway.

Ah, here you are, isn't it? . . . Miss Starling was addressing Ambrose. . . . I've been looking for you. . . . She permitted a forced smile to flit across her features. . . . Auburn is very attractive, but we can't allow her to keep you exclusively for herself. Do come outdoors, both of you, to swim or play tennis or ping-pong.

We were just about to do that thing, Imperia, Auburn Six replied. Mr. Deacon has been telling me about his play.

Imperia glowered again. Did you bring a bathing-suit? She inquired of Ambrose.

I don't know how to swim, he responded.

I didn't bring mine, Auburn assured her rival star. I don't feel like bathing tonight. We'll watch the rest of you.

They followed Imperia, who did not look as if she

were entirely satisfied with this arrangement, to the rear terrace. There, below, on the lawn, a surprising sight met the befuddled eye of Ambrose Deacon. The pool of rich, blue water was brilliantly illuminated with what Ambrose later learned were Klieg lights. Several of the guests were diving and splashing about in the pool. The others sat in canvas lounge-chairs around the border of the water. The band on the terrace was performing Just a Memory.

Herbert Ringrose approached Ambrose.

Well, Deacon, he cried, where's your bathing-suit?

I don't swim, Ambrose explained.

Don't swim! Well, you'll learn how before you leave us. We're taking you around to see Schwarzstein in a week or so, and after you've seen him you'll stay here for ever.

Ambrose looked beyond Ringrose into the twinkling eyes of Auburn Six. Something he saw there reassured him.

Oh, I don't know! he shot back almost jauntily.

Seven

It was nearly ten in the morning when Ambrose awakened and as he slowly recovered consciousness he could not immediately remember where he was. Realization came soon enough, however, and with it remorse. His head throbbed violently. He had, he recalled, as protection against his diffidence, drunk rather freely. Now he sought a water-bottle and poured out and swallowed one, two, three glasses of water.

It was not until he had bathed that it flashed across his mind that he had promised to call upon Auburn Six this morning. He had once been acquainted with a man whose constant preoccupation was the fear that he would be caught in some inextricable situation. To provide himself with a means of escape he had secured a small quantity of potassium cyanide which he wore in a ring on one of his fingers. His fears proved eventually to be well-grounded, for he met his death in a railroad accident, in which his ring-finger was pinioned under the wreckage in such a manner that he was unable to reach it and consequently was burned alive.

In such a moment as the present the mere recollection of this fatal history was sufficient to considerably raise the spirits of Ambrose Deacon. He faced the prospect of meeting Auburn Six with resignation, if not relief. Something, at least, would be settled definitely today. He would go with her willingly to see Griesheimer and that one, inevitably, would kick him out. Then, conceivably, he might explain to Imperia Starling that he had failed in an alien quarter and be on his way to New Mexico. It seemed a logical theory.

With his coffee something in the nature of cheer arrived in the form of a telegram from Jack Story which read: They must be nearly through with you you poor sap stop expect you any day now. Ambrose fervently hoped this message was prophetic as he crunched his toast Melba.

His chronic perturbation returned redoubled, however, when the complications involved in ordering a taxi occurred to him. If he instructed his valet to attend to this matter, the man would probably retort with surprise that one of Miss Starling's cars was always at Mr. Deacon's disposal. Nor could he telephone for a taxi himself without informing the doorman that he was expecting one. After much agitated cogitation he determined that the better way

would be to slip quietly out of the house on foot and trust to the chance of discovering an unoccupied taxi on the road. To be sure, his previous experience in the motor had informed him that Imperia's house was located at a considerable distance from other habitations. This fact was not reassuring, but he did not permit it to interfere with his plan. The road assuredly was lonely, but in the circumstances — he simply could not imagine any valid excuse which would permit him to face a footman with a request for a taxi — it seemed to be the only course of action open to him. He therefore dressed as rapidly as possible and made his way softly out of the house.

He had closed the door behind him with extreme care and was suddenly conscious that he was tip-toeing down the drive as if he were a sneak-thief. Despite the fact that his heart was beating violently and that he would have stopped dead in his tracks had any one called to him, he smiled when he recalled that there was no reason whatever why he should not walk out in the morning if he chose to do so. Moreover he had no evidence that his mode of departure had been observed. Certainly no one called him back. Probably Imperia herself was sleeping, would continue to sleep for several hours.

Once on the open highway he stood at the top of a hill. Orange groves, protected by stone walls, bordered the road on either side. He began his descent as casually as possible, but walking down hill his stride accelerated automatically. As a result, he discovered in a little while that he was growing uncomfortably warm. He made repeated efforts to slacken his pace, but they were unavailing.

A little later, believing himself far enough away from the Starling house so that a certain amount of confidence returned to him, he began to look about for a reasonable opportunity to employ a telephone as he had not met an automobile of any description. The road, for the most part, was still hedged in by walls and groves of orange trees. Occasionally the wall was punctured by a gate but the house was invariably set so far back that it was not even visible. At last the wall broke away and villas set near the road on broad lawns and terraces came into view, but the appearance of these estates was so imposing that Ambrose did not dare approach them. Any one of these residences might be occupied by a friend of Imperia's, a friend indeed who having dined with her last night might recognize him, and who would regard his conduct as eccentric, to say the least. Beads of perspiration moistened his brow. He

groaned as his ungovernable knees bent faster and faster beneath him.

It was nearly half an hour after he had left Imperia's house that, at a cross-road, he encountered a milkwagon propelled by a motor. The driver having hesitated for a few moments to adjust some disordered mechanism, Ambrose summoned enough courage to address him.

Are you going to Hollywood? he demanded.

Betcher life, son, replied the driver with that hearty, informal enthusiasm indigenous in California to bellboys, teamsters, and the like. Want to come along?

It was highly probable that Ambrose never would have discovered sufficient authority to make a direct request to this effect, but he was so relieved to have the invitation thrust upon him in so sunny a manner that he responded almost cheerfully: It would be awfully good of you. Just drop me anywhere where I can pick up a taxi.

Once they were seated side by side high on the front of the vehicle, the driver regarded Ambrose with curiosity.

I s'pose your car cashed in? he suggested interrogatively.

Cashed in?

Busted. Smashed.

Ambrose nodded violently, gratefully

Yes, he said, I met with an accident. I'm hunting a garage.

I'd just as lief go back and pull you down, the young man offered.

Ambrose hastened to object to this friendly proposal.

It's too bad for that! he cried. We'd never get the car down. I lost three wheels, he concluded desperately.

Whew! The driver whistled his astonishment. I'd like to see that. I'd just as lief drive back.

The fact is, Ambrose protested, mopping his brow, I'm in a hurry. . . . Got to attend to some business before I go back for the car. I'm late now.

The driver was obviously disappointed.

All right, he replied in a tone somewhat colder than that which he had previously employed, I'll get you down the hill in no time.

They drove along. Presently the milkman again addressed Ambrose: You came out pretty well. . . . He was inspecting Ambrose closely. . . . Not even a scratch. I don't see how you could lose three wheels without getting mussed up a little.

Yes, I did, didn't I? Ambrose agreed, grinning idiotically.

The milkman, driving straight ahead, stared at his strange passenger for a few seconds and then a silence fell between the two, a silence so complete that it created an embarrassment in Ambrose, but he could not think of a word to add to what had already been said. His embarrassment was by no means dissipated when, a little while later, they struck Wilshire Boulevard. In fact he was so utterly confused that he could not decide whether or not to give the fellow a tip. Eventually he decided against this procedure — the man might resent it, he considered as the car paused — and, with a self-conscious, flippant, Well, thank you; I'll see you again some time, he swung off the high box, balanced precariously on the mud-guard, stumbled, lost himself, and fell flat on his belly in the street.

Picking himself up hastily, he brushed what he could of the dust from his clothes, resentfully aware at the same time that the milkman had not waited to see whether he had killed himself, when suddenly he perceived that he was being closely scrutinized. He stared back at a figure on the kerb and, recognizing Herbert Ringrose, went forward to speak to him.

Well, Mr. Deacon? In Ringrose's tone was

blended bland astonishment with an even more suave disapproval.

Smiling feebly, Ambrose held out his hand with an extremely unsuccessful effort to be jovial. His manner, as he inquired, How are you, Mr. Ringrose? was rather like that of an ocean voyager who steps off the gangway to meet an unexpected creditor on the dock.

Ringrose was silent, but stern rebuke shone from his eye.

I suppose you are wondering . . . I suppose it seems strange to you . . . You probably think . . .

It was typical of Ambrose that while inwardly he could discover no reason why he should explain or apologize, outwardly he was compelled to do so.

I do indeed, the moving picture director assented. I think it is *very* strange. What in the world were you doing on a milkwagon and why did you pop off it in this undignified manner? You are the guest of one of the great celebrities of the world and anything eccentric you may do is likely to reflect on her popularity . . . even on mine when I make her pictures. I'd like to know, he went on solemnly, how you think Golden Dreams will go in the movie houses when it becomes known to the fans that Miss Starling's guest, Ambrose Deacon, the eminent play-

wright, is in the habit of driving down Wilshire Boulevard on the box of a delivery wagon, more, that he is bounced off this box to roll in the street like a keg of beer. It will certainly be believed that her hospitality is at fault, that she refused him the use of her cars.

Oh no! cried Ambrose in anguish. They won't think that! They'll never know!

I can't imagine what the fans will think if they find out. You never can tell. The fans are peculiar. They are entirely through with Rosalba Dolfinger because it became known that she did not eat turkey on Thanksgiving. They have shown conclusively, by remaining away in vast crowds from the theatres where her pictures have been announced, that they do not care for Lily Harris's latest lover. They have lost interest in Stella Which because her pet bear bit a neighbour's child. Only time and the fan-mail will show what the fans will think about a guest of Imperia Starling's, and a distinguished guest at that, who has behaved as you have behaved this morning.

They'll never find out unless you tell! Ambrose protested.

I tell! Anger burned the cheeks of Herbert Ringrose. Fire flashed from his eyes. I tell! I'd cut out my tongue first. I'd cauterize my vocal organs. Hot

irons couldn't drag the degrading fact out of me. They could put me on the rack, he went on, working himself up, they could submit me to the water torture and not one word would they get out of me. If, he added, I were the protagonist at an auto-da-fé I would silently burn at the stake rather than divulge this ridiculous catastrophe.

Nobody else has noticed, Ambrose almost whimpered.

Herbert Ringrose surveyed the environment. It was true. Pedestrians walked casually on the sidewalks. Traffic followed its usual course in the street.

Where are you going? Ringrose demanded in a somewhat less lugubrious tone.

To the Ambassador. Relieved by the freeing of the tension, Ambrose shot out the truth and then regretted it bitterly.

Not in that condition, Ringrose insisted. Come with me.

Like a naughty boy caught in a shameful act, Ambrose followed his tormentor into a nearby haberdasher's where he was brushed into better condition.

Now, announced Ringrose with withering irony, if you don't mind, I'll send you on in a taxi.

At this precise moment Ambrose's knees began to tremble. He felt suddenly sick. A huge tub of hy-

drangeas tumbled from the balcony of a building opposite where he stood.

Good God, what was that? he demanded.

An earthquake, Mr. Deacon. Merely an earthquake, Ringrose repeated significantly.

Requisitioning a passing vehicle, he installed the distinguished dramatist therein. Then he leaned forward confidentially to announce: We'll go into this whole matter later.

This last remark created so deep an impression on that whirlpool which at present constituted Ambrose Deacon's consciousness that he found it possible to enjoy only confused glimpses of the lines of stately palms, the stalls where bright-hued flowers were vended, or the rows of stucco villas. Quite suddenly, as the impertinence of Ringrose's diatribe forced itself on his reason, he flushed with anger. What right had this ham director to talk to him, Ambrose Deacon, in this manner? Whose business other than his own was it if he chose to travel on milkwagons and to fling himself into space from their high seats? And yet he knew full well, if Ringrose should suddenly confront him in the taxi, he would be afraid to take him to task for his presumption.

As the chauffeur drove up before the perron of the

Ambassador, Ambrose experienced a sense of relief, realizing as he did that the events of the next hour might settle his future, and secure for him the freedom of action he so much desired. He would surely be considered a sorry candidate for the construction of picture stories and by night it was conceivable he might be well on his way back to New Mexico and the soothing, if somewhat cynical, companionship of Jack Story.

Stepping out of the taxi, he reached for his pocketbook to pay the chauffeur when he was startled to hear the starter exclaim, And how are you today, you broth of a boy?

Pretty well, thank you, he responded shyly at this unexpected reminder that Dion Boucicault had once written plays, as he stared in amazement at the ruddy-cheeked Irishman of middle age who had greeted him.

It's a pleasure to see you again looking yourself and that's no lie I'm after telling you. An' for whom might you be calling today?

Miss Auburn Six, Ambrose replied, handing the man a dollar and wondering if he should make it five.

Thank you, sir. Sure and Miss Six lives in Siesta, the man explained. An' would you be knowing the way?

Ambrose wondered if this meant that Miss Six were asleep. At any rate he didn't know the way and he shook his head to this effect.

I'll be after sending one of the boys with you to show you, the starter announced, and happy Miss Six will be to see a handsome gentleman like yourself.

Ambrose blushed as the bellboy led the way briskly under the vine-clad pergola, down the walk to the bungalow designated as Siesta. In answer to a tap on the screen-door a maid invited Ambrose to enter.

Mr. Deacon? she inquired, and to his assent replied, Miss Six will be ready in just a moment.

Ambrose, despite his trepidation, could not resist the winning charm of the room with its light French furniture and its toile de Jouy hangings. Bright sunlight poured through the windows and glittered on the polished surface of a copper bowl filled with yellow roses.

Presently a short, slender woman with masses of brown hair coiled about her head entered. Her expression was so completely friendly that Ambrose somehow felt at home with her at once.

She introduced herself: I am Auburn's mother.

Ambrose met her hand.

Do you like California? she asked, after she had invited him to sit down.

I do *not*. I do not like California. There was emotion in his tone.

Mrs. Six smiled. I know, she replied. Too much sun, the monotonous sun. We all get tired of it, but, believe me, sometimes it rains and then you'll want the sun back. On the whole we're happy here. Auburn has her work, and my work is to take care of Auburn. We both have plenty to do. This bungalow is pleasant and I don't have to worry about housekeeping and servants as I would if Auburn built a villa at Santa Monica or Beverly. I think Auburn is the only important star in the place without a villa in Beverly, a Hispano Suiza, and a collection of police dogs. I've no doubt the others consider her eccentric.

At this juncture the star entered, radiant in a yellow-green frock and a flopping straw hat of the same shade which brought out the verdant lights in her pale hair.

Hello! she cried. I wondered if you'd come.

Good morning, Ambrose responded gravely. I promised, you know.

She laughed. Do you always keep your promises?

I try to.

Well, you'll probably get over that habit here, but

I'm glad you kept your promise today. It's time we should leave. . . . She went to the telephone. . . . Hello, give me the starter. . . . Then, Is my car there, Hughie? This is Miss Six. Send it down the drive. Go along with you!

Hughie never forgets to say nice things, she said, as she replaced the receiver. Come along. We'll walk across the lawn. Good-bye, mother.

Good-bye, dear. . . . Mrs. Six embraced her daughter. . . . Good-bye, Mr. Deacon.

They strolled around to the drive back of the bungalow where they found Miss Six's car waiting.

Mr. Deacon, she was saying a moment later when they were seated in the moving automobile, you mustn't be afraid of Griesheimer. His manner is rather abrupt, probably because he's shy or has an inferiority complex. You see he never had an education — except in the cloak and suit business or something like that — but he means well. He's just trying to cover up his real feelings.

Miss Six, Ambrose replied with fervour, I think I'm afraid of everybody out here except you. I think I'm afraid of California itself.

Regarding him quizzically, she repeated: Don't be afraid of Ben Griesheimer.

I'm sure I shall be. I can't help it, but it doesn't

matter in the least. You see I don't want to write a story for the films. I want to go home.

You're very modest, she assured him.

I *must* make you understand, he insisted. It isn't modesty at all. It's knowledge of myself. I really can't do it. I haven't the remotest idea how to write a screen scenario. I want to go to New Mexico.

So I heard you say last night. It seems to be a sort of refrain with you. You are not very flattering to me, Mr. Deacon, Auburn Six added, but she was smiling broadly.

But Miss Six, he stammered, I've already told you . . . At least I intended to . . . I don't mind you . . . that is I like you better, I feel more at home with you, than with anybody else out here. I wouldn't be here now if I didn't.

She laughed outright. Mr. Deacon, she said, you are delicious, simply delicious, and I have a feeling that you'll get on all right with Griesheimer.

The façade of the L.L.B. Studio at Culver City resembled a mediæval Italian fortress. Characteristically, however, the great blocks of stone of which it appeared to be constructed on closer inspection proved to be made of stucco. They entered the waiting-room and Auburn approached the bright-eyed boy at the desk.

We want to see Mr. Griesheimer, she explained. I have an appointment.

The boy telephoned the great man's secretary.

He'll see you in a minute, the boy announced. He asks will you please wait for him.

As they entered through a swinging gate Ambrose felt immediately that he had crossed a border into another world. Up and down the corridor in a variety of costumes passed a strange procession of actors in make-up. These mingled with boys with rolls of film in containers, secretaries with notebooks, and grey-haired men who resembled Wall Street brokers. One of the latter greeted Miss Six.

What are you waiting for, Auburn? Want to come in my office.

Thanks, Cliff, she replied, we'd be glad to. This is Mr. Deacon, Mr. Morrison.

Morrison led the way to his room, but before they had reached it a boy approached with a message that Mr. Griesheimer was ready to receive them.

Ambrose's heart was beating violently. Remember, he reassured himself, that it will soon be over and you will be free. It's like having a tooth pulled. The worst part is the anticipation.

The corridor seemed to be endless, but at last Auburn opened a door and they stood in the

presence. The room was panelled in Circassian walnut, heavy red satin damask curtains shaded the light at the window, and a turkey red rug covered most of the parqueted floor. At his desk, his back toward the window, sat Ben Griesheimer, a man of perhaps sixty, with a great hooked nose and bead-like eyes which completed his resemblance to a sinister eagle. His multiple chins and his expansive belly somehow quarrelled with this first impression. On the glass-topped desk in front of him stood several framed photographs, one of Auburn Six, another of an imposing Jewish lady, probably Mrs. Griesheimer, Ambrose decided, and still another of a growing family of Jewish children grouped on a lawn with a family of Norwegian elkhounds.

In response to Auburn's introduction, the fat man extended a flabby hand on which sparkled a huge diamond set in a heavy band of gold, but he did not raise his eyes.

How are you, Mr. Deacon? he inquired brusquely. Then, Sit down, please.

They obeyed him and an awkward silence followed while he continued to examine papers, a silence broken by the man's impatient question, Well, well, what can I do for you?

Auburn saw fit to reply: You know Mr. Deacon

is one of our most successful and celebrated playwrights. He is the author of The Stafford Will Case which has been running in New York for months. I think he ought to be writing for L.L.B. We need men like him.

Humph! Griesheimer ejaculated gruffly. Writing for the theatre and writing for the movies is two different propositions, to — tally different. Most playwrights fall down when they come out here. . . . He turned to Ambrose. Well, what you got in mind to write? he demanded.

I don't want to write anything, responded Ambrose, whose agony was piteous.

The great man regarded him with astonishment.

Then what do you want here? he insisted.

Miss Six brought me. She said . . .

I know what she said, Griesheimer interrupted. What do *you* say?

I don't think I can write stories for the films. I don't know anything about moving pictures. It seemed to Ambrose that his voice sounded unnecessarily shrill.

Have a cigar, Mr. Deacon, Griesheimer invited him abruptly, as he pushed forward an embossed metal box.

Ambrose was not accustomed to smoking cigars —

actually they made him ill — but he did not refuse this one.

You don't know . . . ? There was awe in the magnate's voice. In reply to a button he pushed on his desk, a secretary entered almost instantaneously. Griesheimer entrusted a heap of papers to him with the instruction, Tell Dick Ruby I'll see him in thirty minutes.

The secretary vanished noiselessly while Griesheimer leaned forward and said, Now, Mr. Deacon, will you please say that again.

Ambrose, extremely uncomfortable in a very comfortable huge leather arm-chair, nervously twisted the brim of his hat.

I said, he reiterated, that I don't think I can write stories for the films. I never saw any moving pictures, he went on wildly.

Never saw no pictures! I wonder if you're making the mistake so many of these young smart alecks make today of not taking pictures seriously. I wonder if you know, Mr. Deacon, that this is America's fourth largest industry and probably will be, probably will be, I say, the greatest of the world's arts. Why, we're working in raw material we don't know about ourselves yet, it's so vast, it's so great, it's so unprecedented. . . . Griesheimer, having delivered

himself of these sentences as if they were part of an after-dinner speech, closed his bead-like eyes and rolled his tongue ecstatically around his cheek. He was beginning, Ambrose believed, to resemble a hippopotamus more than an eagle. Presently the great man inquired: How many copies of a book do you sell, Mr. Deacon?

I haven't published a book yet, Ambrose replied.

Well, and s'pose you did, how many *would* you sell? Griesheimer persisted.

My first book will be a book of short stories. It might sell two thousand copies. Probably not so many.

Two thousand copies! Griesheimer thundered scornfully. Did you hear that, Auburn? Two thousand copies. That means perhaps four thousand people — let's be generous — seven thousand people should read your masterpiece. Have you any idea, Mr. Deacon, how many people should witness a film spectacle by you?

I don't believe I have.

Between fifty and a hundred million, sir, between fifty and a hundred million, Griesheimer repeated in a tone that implied that even he regarded these figures with wonder, and yet you don't respect the films!

You didn't understand me, Ambrose cried.

And yet you don't respect the films, Griesheimer insisted. I don't want to be rough, Mr. Deacon, but if you are trying to raise your price I warn you you are going about it in the wrong way.

I . . .

Just a minute, please. This firm . . . Griesheimer hesitated and then began again: This group of artists, Mr. Deacon, while organized on a business basis, conducts its affairs on the highest moral and artistic principles. I may tell you indeed, sir, that this spirit of morality is demanded of all our employees whatever their rank or station, from the highest paid star to the lowest extra boy. Why, the very ushers in our moving picture cathedrals, Mr. Deacon, ain't permitted to smoke. Morals, even outside business hours, is one of our great concerns. We don't stand for vice, sir!

Ambrose, not being able to anticipate a suitable peroration, trembled. Whither could all this be leading?

Our stars have mothers, Mr. Deacon. They're chaperoned proper at all times. On this lot, sir, we frown on illicit love. The great American public, we discovered, prefers the star who is pure to the star that's lived her life, so to speak.

I . . .

Wait a minute, Mr. Deacon. Don't interrupt. What I am getting at is this: Our firm, our group of artists, pays authors the highest sums compatible with sound business principles. Perhaps — I won't say for sure — we should pay you just a little more than we pay some of the others. It is reported to me, Mr. Deacon . . . Griesheimer's tone now became insinuating . . . that you are at present the guest of Imperia Starling. I should hate to believe, Mr. Deacon, you are playing us against Invincible to see which'll offer you the highest price.

It's not true! Ambrose positively shrieked. I tell you I don't want to write for the films. I don't know anything about pictures. I . . .

The film magnate changed his tactics. Mr. Deacon, he demanded, how much do you want?

I don't want anything. I want to go to New Mexico.

How much has Schwarzstein offered you?

He hasn't offered me anything. I haven't seen Schwarzstein. I can't write stories for you. I don't know anything about moving pictures.

Griesheimer appeared to meditate. Presently he pushed a button and his secretary again made his appearance.

Bring me, he commanded, one of the standard contracts for authors.

Chatting casually with Auburn Six about the casting of her next picture, he awaited the secretary's return, to all appearances in a most cheerful humour.

When the secretary entered with the contract, Griesheimer, without even glancing at it, passed it across his desk to Ambrose.

Read the third paragraph, he suggested.

Ambrose read the indicated lines which related to honorariums. A sum which seemed fantastic was mentioned.

That's the price we ordinarily pay for material, good material, Griesheimer announced. In your case I should double it.

But I tell you I don't want to write stories for films, cried Ambrose. I had no idea that you would make me an offer.

I suppose that's why you're here, the great man sneered, but in no unkindly fashion. Treble it, he added abruptly.

I want to go to Santa Fe! Ambrose reiterated.

Why you crave to go to Santa Fe is beyond me, Griesheimer replied, but we won't let no extraordinary ambition like that stand in our way. You can go to Santa Fe. We'll send a secretary or any other

little thing you want along with you. You can take a whole staff if you want to, your *unit*. It would be more convenient to have you work here, but if you must go to New Mexico it should be arranged.

But you don't understand, Ambrose protested. I don't know a thing about the Riviera or the Wild West or any other of those places where film stories are laid. I write stories of small town life.

The hippopotamus positively beamed. Just what we're looking for, stories of small town life! he exclaimed. That's the specialty of our star, Dick Ruby. I'll ask 'em to run a couple of Dick's features off for you in the projection room so you can have an idea of what he can do. Hell! he ejaculated, Dick's pretty near through a picture. He can go to New Mexico with you and let you study his personality.

But I'm visiting a friend at Santa Fe. I can't take along a troupe. . . . Ambrose was becoming mildly indignant.

Two hotels there, more'n enough to accommodate Dick and your unit both, was Griesheimer's laconic comment.

Ambrose knew that he had exhausted his capacity for argument. He had learned from his recent experiences that all his objections would somehow be overruled. In his present dilemma an expedient

occurred to him. He would ask for time and when he was well out of this office he would escape from this cursed city where he had suffered as he had never suffered before.

Anyway, he explained, I'll have to consult my lawyer about this first.

You're not going to see Schwarzstein again?

I tell you I haven't seen him at all and I don't intend to see him, Ambrose declared, not without heat.

I warn you it won't do you no good with us. I wouldn't bargain. I wouldn't meet a raise from him. I offered you the highest figure a playwright's ever been offered by this firm . . . this group of artists. Here's the contract. . . . Griesheimer scratched out a few figures and substituted others. . . . You should try to get a better one in Hollywood. Come back with your name signed to it, Mr. Deacon, and you'll never regret it. You'll find us easy masters, the great man ended on a note of elephantine joviality.

At last Ambrose was free. As he walked on air down the corridor, Auburn Six remarked: I've certainly got to hand it to you. You may be a great playwright, but you're the greatest little business man who ever came out here!

Eight

Driving back to Imperia's villa, this time in a taxi, Ambrose realized that his ordeal was by no means at an end. The predicament in which Herbert Ringrose had discovered him earlier in the day was bound to furnish material for a new scene in which, unwittingly, he seemed to be cast to play the leading rôle. Indeed, Ringrose had intimated as much. He considered his situation: he had been led into this labyrinth by his awkward incapacity to say no when some one else was shouting yes. Certainly on the train with Imperia Starling he had foreseen no such serious outcome. Her arguments, after all, had been so specious that it seemed easier to yield to her wishes, especially as he had believed that once in Hollywood his inability to prove useful in the scheme organized by the magnates of the moving picture world would be recognized. He had felt certain that there would be no demand for unoffered services. Today, to his amazement, he had learned that there was a very lively demand for them.

In his pocket he carried an unsigned contract. Fulfilled, it would mean that at his present rate of

expenditure it would never be necessary for him to earn another dollar. He could, however, discern no possible advantage to be derived from this potential addition to his income as the royalties from his play, past and future, would amply provide for more than his mere comfort. He cherished no ambition to alter his habitual manner of living. He did not long to move into a more elaborate apartment or a house. He could imagine no interest in travel: the present unfortunate instance had taught him that travel might work actual mischief. He cherished no passion to entertain, except in a small way his immediate friends, an extremely limited circle, none of whom expected, or received, more elaborate refreshment than that provided by beer, highballs, and cheese or ham sandwiches. He assuredly had no intention of marrying. No, he couldn't see any logical benefit to be derived from adding a great many more thousand dollars to his present extremely satisfactory income.

This aspect of the case aside, moreover, he knew full well that it would be absolutely impossible for him even to embark on, much less achieve, a career as a moving picture script writer. Plots, adventures, escapades, whatever was demanded by this industry, were not his specialty. His talents rather had been developed along the lines of character, incident, and

background, talents for which, at least in the present state of development of the cinema — he judged by the film he had seen at Imperia's the evening before — there seemed to be no present demand in the factories of Culver City. It came to this: what he couldn't do, he couldn't do, no matter how much money was offered him, no matter how much he might want this money.

Inwardly, doubtless, he was strong enough. His will and his reason were not at fault, but these did not appear to co-ordinate successfully with his outward expressions. In the circumstances, taking into account his inherent inability to say no in the face of persuasion or argument, the only possible solution of the problem seemed to lie in flight. They might, he reflected with horror, attempt to keep him a prisoner at the bungalow — his only excuse for returning there was to pack his bags — but, even so, a clandestine escape might be managed.

If I ever get out of this, he swore to himself, I'll never be persuaded even to visit California again.

As his taxi headed into the long private drive leading to Imperia's residence, he became conscious that his habitual timidity was conquering him. His doubts and fears revived to an alarming extent. It was all very well to outline a course of conduct, but difficult

to carry it through when confronted by the extremely unpredictable temperament of Imperia Starling, to say nothing of the determined, and lately impertinent, Herbert Ringrose.

His perturbation was considerably enhanced, as the taxi turned a corner of the drive and the house sprang into view, by the sight of a solitary figure poised precariously on the terrace, that of Mama Starling, clad in black, apparently scanning the horizon for his reappearance. There was something about her manner that suggested Brangaene warning the guilty Isolde. Descending from the motor he was conscious, even as he turned his back to pay the chauffeur, of her unsteady approach. She leaned towards him confidentially, the bearer of woeful tidings.

You're going to catch it! she whispered hoarsely. I'm sorry for you, but don't be afraid of her. I tell you she likes you. Buck up and sass her. It'll do her good! She'll throw a fit of hysterics and maybe bust a vase or two, but she'll get over it.

Prepared as he was in a measure for din and disaster, Ambrose was shattered anew by this prophetic vision of the future and he followed the sibyl into the house with a dejected air which did not promise much for a prospective display of spirit. In the great

hall he found Herbert Ringrose, pacing back and forth, his head bowed and his arms folded across his breast.

Well, *here* you are at last, was the director's gruff exclamation.

Crossing the room, Ringrose opened the door on the back terrace to call Imperia.

Ambrose backed towards the fire-place to await the inquisition, the verbal onslaught that he could no longer doubt would be aimed in his direction. Mama Starling sank into a chair in a shadowed corner of the room and covered her face with her pudgy, jewelled hands. Herbert Ringrose continued to pace the floor nervously.

The entrance of the star was in keeping with her taste for histrionics. Dressed entirely in black, with earrings and choker of jet, her white face even whiter than usual, she tottered in, supported on the arm of Count Jaime, whose countenance was a proclamation of his antipathy towards Ambrose. Crossing the room until she stood facing the culprit with a look of accusation, she sank into a couch conveniently placed behind her. Standing beside her, Count Jaime softly stroked her hand.

How could you, she began reproachfully, how could you do it?

Ambrose, hemmed in by cohorts of inimical figures, was quite unable to say. He wished he had chosen a position which would permit him a better opportunity for evasion, one by the door leading to the drive, for instance.

Imperia did not appear to be put out by his silence. It is probable in any case that she regarded her question as purely rhetorical.

The vulgarity of it, she moaned, isn't it, that a guest of mine should consent to drive into Hollywood on a milkwagon and then to fall off this wagon in the presence of a hooting, screeching mob! I'll never get over the shame of it. The crowd — I can see them now — pointing to you, and through you at *me!* Laughing at my stinginess, that I would not let my guest use my motor. They'll laugh at me everywhere. My career is over, done, dead. I am made ridiculous, and by the man I befriended. She began to sob softly.

Ambrose, unprepared for so vindictive an attack, protested: There wasn't any crowd. Nobody saw me but Ringrose. Besides, nobody knew me.

Hang it, Imperia, Ringrose cried, I didn't tell you there was a crowd. That's not . . .

Know you! Of course they knew you! Didn't Herbert know you when he met you on the train? Didn't

I know you the first moment I saw you? Doesn't everybody in Hollywood know you are my guest?

I'm sorry, Miss Starling, Ambrose mumbled, conciliatory, although he actually felt like shaking the woman.

Sorry! It's too late to be sorry. My beautiful Golden Dreams is spoiled. People will go to it only to laugh at me, isn't it? I am ruined! Ruined! . . . She patted her eyes with her handkerchief, carefully avoiding rubbing the mascara on her lashes. . . . How could you do it? she reiterated in a lugubrious tone.

Count Jaime was scowling frightfully.

Ringrose intervened once again.

I don't think you get this straight, Imperia, he protested. What you're talking about doesn't matter. Nobody actually saw him but me, and you know I'm not going to boast about it. Let's stick to the real issue: why did he go to the Ambassador?

Yes, assented the star, surprisingly as if the question had just occurred to her, rising, and speaking with unexpected force in view of her prediction regarding the complete collapse of her career, why did you go to the Ambassador?

Ambrose blurted out the truth: I went there to see Auburn Six.

I told you so, Ringrose proclaimed triumphantly. Disloyal as well as disorderly.

O God! . . . The star turned her eyes to the ceiling as she sank back into the couch and groaned, That I should live to see this day!

Ambrose's silence did not imply that he felt entirely comfortable.

Why did you call on Auburn Six? Ringrose persisted.

No match for these third degree methods, Ambrose stammered, She took me to meet Griesheimer.

Now perhaps they would drive him out. He prayed that they would throw him out.

I knew it! Imperia shrieked. So this is the thanks I get for my kindness to you. This is my reward. I answer your beseechings, isn't it, and take you to Hollywood. I invite you to share my home, I take you to see Lee Schwarzstein . . .

Be fair, Imperia, Ringrose warned her. You haven't yet.

I was going to take him. The appointment had been arranged. And you turn on me, she shouted at Ambrose, and drive out of my door like a kinkajou on a milkwagon to the L.L.B. lot in Culver City to see Griesheimer! . . . She made a very pretty

modulation of her mood as she demanded, How much did he offer you?

I've told you more than once that I don't know anything about pictures, Ambrose replied, evading this question. I'm not going to write for anybody. I'm going to Santa Fe.

There you are . . . Imperia waved her hand to emphasize how obvious it all was. . . . Griesheimer's got him. How much did he offer you?

I don't see that it matters, Ambrose replied. I'm going to Santa Fe.

It was the turn of Ringrose to groan. It's worse than I thought, he exclaimed. Griesheimer surely has got him.

He hasn't! Ambrose almost shrieked.

Do you swear it? Imperia demanded.

He hasn't, Ambrose repeated doggedly.

The star's face brightened.

Perhaps, she said, he's telling the truth. Then it isn't too late, isn't it? We'll take you to Schwarzstein after all.

I won't wait three weeks, Ambrose declared stubbornly. I'm going to Santa Fe.

But you promised, she reminded him. Then to Ringrose: Do you suppose Lee would see him earlier?

He's got to, that's all, growled the director as he strode to the telephone.

The group listened attentively while he called the Invincible Studio and requested that Mr. Schwarzstein be put on the wire. After a painful interval his request was apparently fulfilled.

Hello, is that you, Lec? This is Herbert. . . . Herbert. . . . Herbert Ringrose. . . . Yes, I know you're busy. You've *got* to listen to me. . . . No, it won't take long. I'm at Imperia's. . . . Imperia Starling's. . . . Yes. That playwright we were talking to you about has seen Griesheimer. L.L.B's made him a tremendous offer, *tremendous*. Can't you shift his appointment forward? . . . Ambrose Deacon. . . . Deacon! Don't you remember? . . . But Griesheimer . . . All right. Yes, call me at Imperia's.

He says he'll call me back in five minutes, he explained as he replaced the receiver.

Let *me* talk to him! Imperia cried with resolution.

She quickly established a connection with the studio, but there appeared to be difficulty about getting through to Schwarzstein.

Who's this? she demanded. . . . I've got to talk to Mr. Schwarzstein. At once, do you hear? . . .

But this is Miss Starling, *Imperia* Starling. Do you understand, you idiot? . . . Slamming down the receiver she snapped out to Ringrose, He says he'll call me back in five minutes.

The room was charged with an unpleasant electricity. Ringrose again began to pace back and forth. Imperia towered over a table and flung a heap of books, one at a time, to the floor.

Damn him! Damn him! she moaned.

It was not quite clear to Ambrose who was being damned. Also he was beginning to be furiously embarrassed by the Count's foreboding glare. Only Mama Starling sat quietly in her chair, her face still hidden behind her palms. The tension was broken, after what seemed a lifetime to Ambrose, by the tinkling of the telephone bell. Both Imperia and Ringrose sprang towards the instrument. It was Imperia, however, who lifted the receiver.

Yes, she cried impatiently, this is Miss Starling. . . . A long pause followed. . . . Imperia tapped her foot on the floor. . . . At last, Is that you, Lee? . . . You can? Tomorrow. . . . Good-bye!

She was positively beaming as she announced to the room: Tomorrow at one! It's arranged.

I've stood sufficiently! A new figure had appropriated the centre of the stage.

Why, Jaime! Imperia cajoled him.

Eider he goes or I goes. I can see trew de eye of a pin. I know what it is *you* want!

Mrs. Starling had risen. Don't you dare speak to my daughter like that! she cried.

Shut up, Mama! Imperia commanded. Mrs. Starling obediently subsided into her chair.

The star approached her cicisbeo.

What's got into *you,* eh? she cried.

I see your schemes trew, he shouted. You wants him. It's all applecake dis Schwarzstein fuss. What you bring him to de house for? Why? He goes or I goes!

His eyes blazed with fury. So, it may be added, did those of Imperia Starling. Promptly she smashed the sticks of a fan that had once been the property of Marie Antoinette over the unhappy foreigner's head.

You go and damn quick! she screamed.

You impertinent puppy! Lounge lizard! Mama found the courage to hurl at him.

Jaime cowered before this concentrated attack. You don't mean, Imperia, he implored, you don't mean?

I do mean! Her eyes roved, apparently seeking an

object of convenient size to hurl at the head of the offending cavaliere servente. Observing her intention, he skulked towards the door, slipping through the aperture just in time to avoid contact with a Spanish pewter candlestick of considerable size and weight. Herbert Ringrose had warned in vain: Look out, Imperia! That isn't yucca wood.

Immediately after Jaime's enforced departure, Imperia gave vent to a brilliant fit of hysterics.

What a day! What a day! she moaned.

There, there, dearie. Soothing her, Mama Starling led her charge from the room.

Herbert Ringrose did not appear to have observed that anything untoward had occurred. He approached Ambrose with a hearty, disarming directness.

It's all settled now, my boy. One o'clock tomorrow. . . . Ambrose recoiled automatically before the inevitable slap on the shoulder. . . . You're in luck. Lee never did this for anybody before. I'm glad he did it for you. It would be too bad for a man of your ability to tie up with a second-class affair like L.L.B. They're all wet. Well, so long, he added blithely. I'll see you tomorrow at twelve-thirty, Deacon.

Seizing his hat he left the room. It was time. Ambrose, dazed, sank into a chair. He summoned enough of his brain to wonder what manner of wood yucca might be that Imperia could confuse it with pewter.

Nine

Comparatively light-hearted, installed on an eastbound Santa Fe train, Ambrose still wondered how he had been able to effect his escape. It had not been easy. He wasn't sure but that it had been the very difficulties which had given him the will to surmount them.

The events of the previous evening, comic in retrospect, had been extremely tragic at the time. Ambrose was utterly lacking in vanity, but the fantastic occurrences of the past few days had succeeded in persuading him that anything was possible in Hollywood, more particularly where Imperia Starling was concerned. Her law was her own and no one else's. After the melodrama in the great hall of the villa, he had retired trembling to his own suite where he had again eaten his dinner in solitude. Perforce this time, because a footman had notified him that Miss Starling was too ill to eat at all and had requested him to forgive her absence from the table. While he was consuming his lonely dinner, served to him with great elaboration — the flowers, the silver, the attention all were as complete as if he had descended to

the dining-room — he made a resolve to end this farce at once. Accordingly, he had packed his bags and then sat down to wait until that hour when his departure would not be immediately noted, creeping occasionally out into the corridor to discover if any activity were still to be observed about the house. The first of these nocturnal strolls of espionage warned him that the household had not yet retired. The lights had not been extinguished and he could hear conversation, apparently that of the servants, on the lower floor. Much later his vigilance informed him that a deep silence prevailed. The moving picture star, exhausted by the heavy scene she had recently played, apparently had fallen asleep. Mama Starling's door too was closed and no sound penetrated its thickness. At ten o'clock a single light burned on each floor and the stillness had become so monotonous that Ambrose dared extend the field of his investigations. He discovered that the outer door had been locked and bolted, and surmised, with no evidence to the contrary, that the servants had retreated to their own quarters. A more propitious occasion to carry out his plan of flight seemed unlikely to present itself.

Nevertheless, always cautious, he had returned to his rooms to wait nearly an hour before he sum-

moned enough courage to lift his bags and attempt the descent. During this interim the lights had been extinguished and the house was submerged in an inky darkness. It would be much too dangerous, he considered, to risk turning even a single switch. He decided, therefore, to attempt his clandestine flight in the dark.

Slowly and stealthily with his two bags he moved in the direction which he thought was well-remembered. Subsequent events proved that, generally speaking, he had followed the correct path. At the top of the staircase, however, probably urged on by his trepidation, he had slightly accelerated his pace with the unfortunate result that he had collided with a bronze Chinese warrior set on a teakwood pedestal. He, the warrior, the pedestal, and his two bags had immediately made the descent of the staircase in company at full tilt. The resulting din, despite the fact that his very fear had choked the cry in his throat, had been colossal. Terrified by the accident, besides suffering from bruises and shock, he had not contrived to extricate himself from bronze and leather before the lower hall was brightly illuminated and filled with servants, a few fully attired, others in hastily donned dressing-gowns. Their astonishment at, and disapproval of, this unseemly

disturbance were reflected on their usually impassive countenances, but before they had found tongues to question him Imperia appeared, a wraithlike Imperia habited in a négligé of white ostrich plume filaments, followed by Elissa and Mama Starling in night-gowns and flannel dressing-sacques.

The situation offered a splendid opportunity to Imperia and she had taken full advantage of it, surpassing even her own extraordinary record for making scenes. Her accusations had poured forth in a stream so unbroken that Ambrose was given no chance to explain, even supposing that any plausible excuse for his peculiar behaviour had presented itself to his not too inventive mind. Mama too had added her wailings and there had been reason to believe that the servants themselves had not been satisfied with his unconventional deportment. The butler, indeed, had stiffly given notice.

Cowed by circumstances, Ambrose had meekly obeyed the star's injunctions to return to his chamber. His bags had followed him, borne by a footman whose expression had contributed to Ambrose's sense of shame.

For a considerable period after the door had slammed on his ignominy he could still hear alarums and excursions without. Imperia was making a

prodigious amount of noise in several languages while Mama attempted to comfort her in tones which corresponded in volume to the star's own. It was necessary to speak vociferously indeed to make oneself heard above Imperia's ravings. Even at this lugubrious moment it had occurred to Ambrose to wonder if the fact that motion pictures were silent accounted for the enormous volubility of those engaged in making them.

At length the racket abruptly ceased, whispers supplanting shrieks, and now the incident had occurred which had enraged Ambrose to the point of taking decisive action. He had heard the key turning in the lock of his door. Without a moment's hesitation, without a second's consideration, he had approached the open window, glanced out and observed that it would be a comparatively simple matter to swing himself down by the aid of the trunk of the English ivy. Desperation and blind rage gave him the courage. Leaving his bags behind him, he had descended without mishap, although he had landed rather clumsily, covering his clothes with dirt. Rising quickly, he had run as swiftly as he could down the drive and soon was on the open road, well on his way to freedom.

Luck continued to favour him. He had not walked

far before he had encountered a taxi, returning no doubt from a trip to another of the Beverly Hills villas. In the Los Angeles station he had learned that a train was leaving for the East within an hour. Once aboard he had dispatched a telegram to Jack Story warning him of his impending arrival, then tumbled into his berth and fallen into a deep sleep from which he had not awakened until late the next morning when he had looked out upon the multi-coloured Arizona desert.

The telegram somehow miscarried. At any rate Jack Story had not received it in time to meet his distinguished guest at Lamy. A boy in the news-stand of El Ortiz, the Spanish inn with its delightful patio, instructed Ambrose in the lore of how to reach Santa Fe. So he boarded the Harvey bus, driven by a young fellow whose hip bulged with a holstered revolver, reminding Ambrose that bandits still lurked in this lonely country. Bandits, he reflected, would be a positive relief after his experiences of the last few days. The car sped away through the mountains, between uneven rows of rocks of blood-red sandstone that might have been sculptured by one of Montezuma's artists. The earth was spattered with rabbit-brush, juniper, and tumbleweed, and stunted

blue-green fir-trees pushed higher upward. In this comforting isolation Ambrose's spirits soared at every turn of the rapidly revolving wheels.

At La Fonda in Santa Fe he sought directions for reaching his friend's house and learned at last, after demanding information of a number of persons who knew nothing whatever about it, that Jack lived at some distance from town. Ambrose engaged a taxi and started forth.

Jack's house, like most of the others they had passed on the road, was of red adobe, a sprawling one-storey structure before which waved the feathery green plumes of a tamarisk and against which leaned a Mexican wearing a pink and green poncho and, over his left ear, a rose carnation. Behind the house snow-capped mountains rose against the azure sky. A flock of white pigeons circled over the flat roof. The bell was answered by a Mexican girl of some beauty whose smile gave Ambrose the impression that she was taciturn only because she spoke very little English. With dignity and that poise of carriage that only comes from the habitual balancing of heavy objects on the head, she led the way through a tiny entrance hall into a large room roofed with peeled pine-trunks crossed in a herring-bone pattern with branches which supported the hay

thatching. The red adobe walls were hung with Chimayo blankets. Over the fire-place was ranged a row of Indian pots and water-jars. Floor, couches, and chairs were strewn with Chimayo and Navajo blankets in their ancient faded colours. A table was cluttered with a miscellaneous assortment of Navajo and Santo Domingo jewelry: silver and turquoise bracelets and rings in profusion, strings of wampum, great lumps of turquoise, and leather belts set at intervals with medallions of silver embossed with symmetrical designs.

Ambrose had no more than time to note the general effect — the precise character of these and other objects, such as the primitive santos, he acquired later — before Jack appeared in the doorway in corduroy trousers, tucked in high boots, and a soft, brown flannel shirt, open at the collar.

Ambrose, old man, but I am delighted to see you!

He extended his hand and Ambrose grasped it with enthusiasm. What a relief this was after his misadventures of the past week!

I just received your telegram two hours ago, Jack explained. No time to meet you at Lamy, but I guess you came through all right.

Without the least trouble, Ambrose assured his

friend, adding, You're looking fine, Jack, better than I've ever seen you.

Oh, I'm cured, Jack said. I only stay here now because I like it. You'll like it too.

I'm sure I shall, Ambrose replied sincerely.

The playwright sat down before the table laden with silver and turquoise and studied his friend sitting opposite. Jack was certainly tall and handsome, his mass of yellow hair brushed straight back from his high brow, his blue eyes frankly returning Ambrose's stare. Yet there was an unhealthy, if becoming, flush on the cheek-bones, while elsewhere his face seemed to be of an unnatural pallor. Ambrose wondered if Jack were actually cured.

I've had one hell of a time in Hollywood, Jack, was what he found to say.

You can't make my temperature rise by telling me that. What the devil ever gave *you* the wild idea of turning yourself loose in that bunch of steers?

I never had the idea, Jack, Ambrose was glad to confess. I was practically kidnapped.

He related the substance of his experiences on the train going west.

Jack rocked with laughter.

Tell me more! he cried. Tell me more of this simply idiotic story. It's the huskiest scream I've

listened to in years and it could only happen to you. It couldn't, he mused aloud, chuckling, happen to anybody else in the world.

The Mexican girl entered, bearing a tray laden with glasses, bottles, and a bowl of ice.

Try a little Prussic acid, Jack suggested. Tequila or moonshine? Both are equally venomous.

Ambrose accepted a substantial quantity of tequila and under its warming influence he grew more mellow as he continued, at Jack's urgent request, to relate his fabulous experiences.

Jack interrupted him occasionally with a howl or a guffaw.

A milkwagon! he cried. Good Lord, nobody but you. . . . He was choked with mirth.

But after Ambrose had related the episode of his encounter with Griesheimer, Jack became more grave. He continued to listen to the end of the story and smiled once or twice at his friend's account of his amazing departure from Imperia Starling's villa, but when the playwright had concluded, the invalid exclaimed: Ambrose, you're a God damned fool!

Ambrose regarded Jack Story with astonishment.

What do you mean? he demanded.

A cock-eyed simpleton! Jack elaborated.

You don't think . . .

I certainly do. You're an Albino goofer and as wet as a Turkish towel after William H. Taft gets through with it. Have you got that contract with you?

Yes.

Let me see it.

Ambrose passed the contract to Jack and for several moments there was silence as the latter carefully perused its contents.

Why didn't you sign this? Jack inquired, folding up the paper only after he had examined the final clause.

Why, Jack, I can't write screen stuff. You know that!

What difference does that make? Jack demanded stolidly.

How could I carry out the terms of that contract without manufacturing a script?

That's a lot of Santa Claus. I'll bet you haven't read it.

Ambrose admitted the truth of this accusation.

The terms of this contract are up to Griesheimer and L.L.B. It's *their* business, not yours.

What *do* you mean?

I mean that this contract says plain as sky-writing

that these bozos agree to pay you a certain amount — and it's not an amount you can afford to sneeze at — whether they produce your funny piece or not. If they decide it's suitable for production, they pay you as much more. It isn't too late, is it?

Ambrose's eyes opened more widely as his surprise increased.

Too late for what? he asked.

Too late to sign, although I don't know but you'd better see Schwarzstein first and play one against the other, Jack mused.

I won't do it, Jack. I *can't* do it.

Hell! How many times have I got to tell you that doesn't make any difference. They think you can! Sign the papers and turn in the story of Little Red Riding Hood or Cinderella — that's always good hokum — or the Chicago fire or Tristan and Isolde: it really doesn't matter. In the end they'll probably use it and pay you the whole sum mentioned and then you can go and live in Persia or wherever you want to spend your riper years.

But Jack, when you heard I was going to Hollywood you telegraphed me that you thought I was crazy.

So I did. I believe it now. When I saw that telegram I had an idea that you yourself had conceived

the monstrous notion of going out there. Now I've heard the truth, I think you're completely cuckoo.

Jack, I came west to clear out of one jam. Why should I get into another?

Because this is too good a thing to throw down.

But I'm making plenty of money as it is, Ambrose persisted.

You pelican, nobody ever made enough jack. Nobody could. When your play stops running, your income will stop and you'll have to write another. Clean up on this splendid proposition and go to live in Persia.

I don't want to live in Persia, Ambrose responded fretfully.

Well, Akron, Ohio. Anywhere. I don't care.

I won't do it. Ambrose's intimacy with Jack and the effect of the tequila made it possible for him to set his jaw fairly firmly.

As Jack Story shrugged his shoulders and lighted his pipe, Ambrose told himself, I'm in for another argument, but Jack only inquired, Know anything about Indian pottery?

No, I don't, but that looks like fine stuff on the mantel-shelf.

Finest there is out here. Do you see that pot of deep orange and umber and red with the queer stiff

bird on it? That's a Zia pot and that's a Zia bird. Now look at that duller pot next to it. That's a fine Acoma pot, with a parrot on it — according to legend the parrot is said to have led the tribe here from Central America. But the rarest of the lot is that pot at the right end of the shelf. You can tell it's Zia because of its heavy clay, fine glaze, and the rich lozenges of pomegranate red and black, and yet there is an Acoma parrot on it. This odd borrowing is extremely rare. . . .

Ten

Jack on this occasion made no further references to Ambrose's adventures in Hollywood, offered him no more advice. The fact remained that he had already expressed himself so definitely on the subject that repetition would not have revealed his opinions more clearly. It is not strange, therefore, that Ambrose should sit up considering his friend's views and their implications for a long time after he had retired to his little room, chaste and white in the candlelight. A Spanish chest of drawers, a bed, a chair, and a crucifix were the only furniture. The silence outside was broken into sporadically by the singing of a burro or the hooting of an owl.

It was dreadfully confusing to Ambrose to find Jack in agreement with the creatures of Hollywood. He had expected his friend to support him in his intransigent attitude, but his friend, inexplicably, had failed him in this crisis. With Jack behind him, Ambrose felt that he could have bucked the entire moving picture industry. Alone, especially with Jack on the side of the enemy, he was not so sure what he could do. If Jack persisted in his opposition Ambrose

would have no moral support whatever, a reflection which convinced him that if further efforts were made to enlist his services in the ranks of the cinema he would lack the resolution to longer fight. The worst of it was that he now believed that any one of his friends would take exactly the same stand that Jack had taken. He must seem absolutely a fool to refuse to accept the amount of money that had been offered him.

He had one consolation, it came to him at last. He remembered that he was in a haven, hundreds of miles from the spot where playwrights were seduced to become prostitutes for the motion pictures. Unless Jack nagged him — and he suspected it was not in Jack's nature to do this — he could live here very happily for a time. No one could do anything about him, after all. No one, as a matter of fact, knew his whereabouts. To avoid furnishing a clue he would not send for his bags at present. If he purchased a few necessities, he could easily do without his suitcases in this out-of-the-way place. Consoled by this train of reasoning he was able to fall into a refreshing sleep.

In the morning his peace of mind received further support. Jack refrained from any reference to the unwelcome subject, chatting at breakfast about his col-

lection of Indian silver. Later he led Ambrose out to the patio from whence they climbed a rude ladder to the roof of the adobe. Here Ambrose was offered a superb view of the snow-capped mountains, the fields below, the silver-domed capitol of Santa Fe, the towers of the cathedral, and, dotted here and there, the yellow and red adobe houses which somehow fitted into the friendly landscape as the habitations of the peasants do in Tuscany. Burros toiled up the steep distant paths and Mexican women in bright-hued shawls walked with burdens on their heads.

What do you want to do? Jack demanded. We can lounge around the patio or walk about Santa Fe or drive to the Santo Domingo Pueblo or to Taos, to see Edith Dale. If we go to Taos we might stop on the way at the Bouquet Ranch for lunch: Mrs. Crist is worth a special visit. Or we might go to Chimayo to watch them make bad modern blankets and look in on the divine old Spanish chapel at Sanctuario.

There seemed to be plenty of delightful things to do. Ambrose further reflected that wherever he was likely to go around this country the natives would babble in a language that he could not understand: consequently he would feel as isolated as if he had

remained here in the house alone with Jack. He left the choice of diversion to his host.

Later in the morning, however, a lady publicist living at Santa Fe telephoned to ask Jack if he could bring his distinguished guest to lunch, an invitation which Jack accepted without consulting Ambrose.

But how did she learn I was here?

Oh, everybody knows everything about everybody in Santa Fe. Whether it is relayed telepathically through the mountain air or whether the servants gossip I don't know. Anyway we have no secrets from each other. We learned long ago it would be impossible to have and so we don't try.

Marna Frost lived in another adobe house, painted pink. The interior was hung exclusively with Indian and Spanish trophies: beaded moccasins and belts, splendid, ancient feather head-dresses, tassels of scarlet peppers and of multi-coloured ears of corn, ranging from black to magenta, sconces of embossed tin, and Spanish santos, tortured conceptions of the locally favourite saints, painted in vegetable colours on wood. The more elaborate of these were carved out in three dimensions and stood on the mantel-shelf.

Jack had described Marna Frost to Ambrose with some thoroughness. She was a poet of the New Eng-

land school who had suffered several unfortunate experiences of the heart. One affair in particular had left her avowedly bereft of future desire for the companionship of man — at least the white man. Her compensation had been the discovery of the Indian, an entirely fortuitous revelation made to her during a casual visit to the Southwest. The Indian had proved so entirely satisfactory that she had disposed of her old home at Stockbridge in the Berkshires, furnished with pine in accordance with the best local traditions, and removed permanently to Santa Fe where, within a surprisingly short time, she had built up and decorated a new home that seemingly had succeeded in obliterating all memory of her unhappy past.

The red man, apparently, had immediately rewarded her. If he did not greet her approach with enthusiasm, at any rate he did not attempt to run away. Gradually then, this interest in, and an ensuing sentimentalized rationalization of, individuals broadened so that it embraced whole tribes and eventually the race itself. Marna Frost enthusiastically devoted herself to the cause, visiting Washington to beard the legislature on behalf of her protégés, lecturing at large and sending forth from her pink house quantities of pamphlets of a propagandist nature. So ardent

had she become in this her chosen field, that she was soon dubbed the Little Mother of the Indian, an appellation which seemed inexact as a physical description of this Amazon.

Marna Frost, indeed, stood nearly six feet tall and was built proportionately. Her massive ankles were set on pedestal-like feet. Her face, clean-cut beneath piles of coarse red hair, streaked with iron-grey, resembled the face of a horse, her great Roman nose ploughing down between her furrowed cheeks. Rugged was the adjective that would have adequately described this woman of fifty, but from coast to coast in the homes of representatives and senators she was known as the Little Mother of the Indian. Usually a profanely abusive epithet preceded the diminutive adjective.

After listening to the foregoing description, Ambrose was actually relieved when he met the woman. Her manner did not appear to be unduly aggressive. She seemed infinitely less dangerous on the whole than the females of Hollywood with their predatory instincts. Her surprisingly gentle greeting more than made up for her weather-beaten appearance. She asked Ambrose pleasant questions about his play, questions which did not task his limited talent for articulate explanation. It was only after they were

seated at table, eating an excellent luncheon of Mexican dishes in her attractive dining-room, which had been furnished by despoiling the humble interiors of local farmers, that she broached her favourite topic. Jack had warned him that this might prove tiresome, but Ambrose, who had never even considered the Indian before save in his literary or historical aspects, found it absorbing. The customs and habits, religious and social, of these Pueblo tribes to which she had given her special allegiance, became for the moment of vast importance to him. He was thrilled to learn that two tribes had lived for centuries — perhaps for thousands of years — twenty-five miles apart, never intermarrying, speaking different languages, each tribe even with its distinctive costume. It was solely in the practice of religion that the Indian of one tribe met his brother of the other on the same ground, and even here there were disagreements.

The Indian derives from the soil, Miss Frost was saying as she lighted a cheroot, and to the soil he returns thanksgiving. Unless we realize this we cannot comprehend him. All his prayers are directed towards the earth. His whole being is in communication with it. That is why the Hopis dance their snake dance. Through the lustrated serpents which they

take in their mouths they send their yearly message back to Mother Earth. In the spring, at the Taos Pueblo, no wheel is permitted to roll over the ground. It is believed that a rolling wheel would crush the pregnant Mother's offspring.

More and more Ambrose fell under the spell of the soft voice of the Little Mother of the Indian as she detailed further peculiarities of the noble redskin. When she described his manifold sufferings at the hands of white politicians, Ambrose was almost ready to weep in sympathy. Bereft of his land whenever oil or any other valuable commodity was discovered on it, tossed at some senator's whim from a fertile valley where his ancestors had ploughed for generations into an arid desert, in face of all adversity he maintained a stoic indifference. At the end of this discourse Ambrose received with enthusiasm Marna Frost's apparently impersonal but none the less warm proposal that they should all go together on the morrow to visit the Pueblo at Santo Domingo.

Ambrose's initial experience with the Indian was disillusioning. These particular Indians did not appear to be very clean, either in their personal appearance or in their households. The pieces of rotting flesh, strung on lines too low for passing heads to

miss, hanging thus till eventually they were tossed into the pot, did not incline Ambrose towards assenting to Marna Frost's cordial invitation to assist at lunch on a future occasion with some of the more friendly of her protégés. A casual word more than betrayed his feeling.

But they *are* clean ! Marna declared passionately. I tell you that they belong to the earth and the earth belongs to them. As for the rest, bathing is the curse of civilization. We wash our personalities out in the morning tub.

Some of the handsomer men, picturesque with their hair bobbed in front and at the sides, and tied in a peculiar knot at the back, their gay-coloured garments, and their high, red deer-skin moccasins, fastened with buttons of wrought silver, in form so like the shoes of renaissance Italian pages, gave him a more favourable view of the aborigines. The rows of adobe huts with the glamorous inhabitants standing before them, or sitting, cross-legged, drilling turquoise, the great rounded kivas with their projecting ladders, leading into the depths, silhouetted against the blue sky, and particularly the Spanish church with two enchanting piebald horses painted on the wall of the balcony that adorned the façade, completely won his heart, but recently disordered by so many

disagreeable emotions. Like a refrain, dominating his impressions, through all that he observed, ran Marna Frost's stately explanation: All the old men do it: it's an old tribal custom.

With her red friends Marna Frost conversed fluently in Spanish, now and then interjecting a few words in their own familiar tongue. Rather it might be said that she addressed them, as it could not be said that they reciprocated to any great extent. For the most part they replied with little monosyllabic grunts. It was pretty and romantic, this relationship, and Ambrose felt that he too would like to play about a little with these gentle redskins. The fact that he could understand neither of their languages awarded them additional merit in his eyes. In this mood he was easily betrayed into expressing an unwonted degree of appreciation, avowing himself as a deathless admirer of Santo Domingo and describing the day, not untruthfully, as one of the high spots in a career which, until lately, had been singularly free of high spots.

It was obvious that Miss Frost regarded these naïve outbursts with approval, but she contented herself for the moment with adding extra prods to his imagination, stimulating him thereby to further feats of commendation.

It was only on the drive back to Santa Fe that Marna Frost suddenly and surprisingly became more personal.

You were made for this life, Mr. Deacon, she cried. It is your duty to devote yourself to it in the future.

Ambrose stared at her with as much amazement as if nothing had yet amazed him during this western hegira.

We must arrange it at once, she announced firmly if dispassionately. For the moment, of course, you are visiting Jack, but to work together we must live under the same roof, break bread together. Fortunately, my house is quite large enough to permit us to carry out such a plan. When you are not in Washington attacking the House of Representatives you shall make your home with me. Who knows what may come of it? . . . She rewarded him with a terrifying smile, apparently intended to be coy. . . . Together we may accomplish treble what I had set out to accomplish alone. There should, indeed, be no problem that the two of us together could not solve.

But Miss Frost, protested Ambrose, again besieged by alarm, I am out here to rest. I am going . . .

You have given me evidence today, Marna Frost

insisted, of your devotion to the cause. Your better nature will not permit you to ignore the call. However little influence my poor power of speech may have on you, you cannot refuse the plea of a great race.

Hang it, Marna, Jack put in, the race isn't calling Ambrose. Can't you leave him alone? He's had enough trouble. After all he's a playwright.

I have considered that fact, Marna Frost remarked gravely. It is one of the reasons I have come to my decision. Think what dramas, what ballets and masques, he can write about the Indian to be shown around the country! His very important connections with Hollywood will indubitably make it possible for us to create a vast moving picture . . .

Don't speak to Ambrose about moving pictures! Jack interjected.

Jack . . . Marna Frost employed a more severe inflection . . . I know all about your antipathy towards Indians. You laugh at them and their plight. Your indifference practically amounts to a scandal. Under the circumstances there are times when it would be difficult for me to maintain my relationship with you, were it not for my sense of humour. With Mr. Deacon it is different. I have tested Mr. Deacon. His feeling for the Indian is *mine*. We are alike

in this and I know we could work together. I had a premonition of this before he came out here. Now that I have met him I am certain of it. He is my man.

And he done me wrong, Jack muttered into Ambrose's ear, too low for Marna Frost to hear. Well, at least, he went on, now addressing the Little Mother of the Indian, give him a day or so to think it over. I haven't seen Ambrose for months. He is my guest. I want him with me for a few days.

Very well, announced Marna Frost with a studied dignity. I am never unreasonable. I am entirely willing to give him a few days with you, but my mind is made up and nothing will change it. Furthermore, Mr. Deacon, I am convinced that you are with me at heart, although on the surface you show evidences of vacillation.

For the remainder of the drive, over the broad, sun-burned mesa, round and round La Bajada hill, across the plain with the turquoise mines in the distance, Marna Frost remained silent, and it was only very much later, after they had dropped Miss Frost before her home, that Ambrose spoke.

Everybody west of the Rocky Mountains is crazy, he avowed. Everybody!

Jack laughed. Don't mind the antique horse, he

said. A touch of the old fire is burning in her. She's spent most of her life dashing after this man or that.

You don't mean . . . !

I do, indeed. The mythological bird is lusting for you.

Unless she was wild about you she wouldn't let you touch her Indians with a vaulting pole. She's going to take you off to her mountain fastnesses and eat you up.

Jack, Ambrose announced resolutely, I'm going back to New York. I'm safe in New York.

Jack laughed uproariously. Don't take the old gal seriously, he advised. What can she do, after all, if you are unwilling? She can't kidnap you. Just tell her you won't go.

I can't, Ambrose confessed. I just can't tell anybody I won't do anything. I guess I'm not made that way. I'm going back to New York.

Well, I'll tell her then, Jack assured him. Then, Hello, what's this?

They had driven up before Jack's adobe. Standing in the doorway, his revolver in its holster, stood the sheriff.

Well, Ed, what's the matter? Jack inquired, as he descended from the car, followed by Ambrose.

Hello, Jack. Got a Mr. Deacon stoppin' with you?

Sure. Right here. This is Deacon.

Ambrose Deacon?

Certainly. Jack's reply was more curt.

The sheriff looked puzzled and scratched his head.

I guess I got to take him, he announced.

Take *me*! My God, what for? Ambrose demanded.

Jack was practical. Have you got a warrant? he asked.

The sheriff fumbled in his coat-pocket and drew out a telegraph form which he handed to Jack.

It was addressed to the Sheriff of Santa Fe and it was signed by the Chief of Police at Los Angeles. Jack read the message aloud:

If you can find Ambrose Deacon the New York playwright in Santa Fe take into custody and hold till I can send for him stop he is wanted here.

Eleven

Bail, it seemed, was not permitted because the nature of Ambrose's offence was unknown. To be sure a reply to the sheriff's telegraphic query reached Santa Fe in due time, but it simply read: Hold stop parties arrive tomorrow.

Jack Story had been animated by a fury of indignation. He had cursed volubly while his temperature dangerously shot up two degrees. It had been necessary, indeed, for Ambrose to quiet him, for Ambrose felt curiously calm and resigned. He had now arrived at a state of mind in which he was almost prepared to accept blindly any future horror the great Southwest held in store for him. However he turned, whatever he did, apparently made no difference to these strange occidental gods who inexplicably had marked him as a human sacrifice to their splendour.

He permitted Jack to stay by him till late at night, more for Jack's sake than his own, but at last insisted that he should go home. The sheriff for his part had made Ambrose as comfortable as possible, preparing a small room for him with a proper bed, a little aside from the caged area prescribed for more nondescript

prisoners. These, however, succeeded in making their presence felt through the very walls. Bars and partitions apparently did not cut off social intercourse in a Mexican jail. The prisoners, for the most part Mexicans, incarcerated for petty indiscretions of lust and larceny, shouted blatant oaths in Spanish or sang ditties to the plangent plucking of the guitar which sounded mellifluous to an ear ignorant of the language, but which Ambrose nevertheless suspected to be highly obscene. There were señoras and señoritas too who howled and screamed without abatement.

This went on till upwards of one o'clock. At that hour Ambrose made a futile attempt to sleep. He did doze occasionally, but he had long since discovered that the resignation and calm which he had felt earlier in the evening had either been factitious or temporary. His jangled nerves refused to permit him to enjoy a satisfactory repose, and he was beginning to believe that his resources had been taxed to their utmost.

Since, about two weeks earlier, he had stepped aboard the Twentieth Century his life had gone awry. The first time in his career that he had made a definite and consciously initiative movement he had embroiled himself in serious difficulties. Now he was rapidly floating down a swiftly moving stream, too

weary to try to swim. It was more, perhaps, as if he had descended to a fiery hell where he had been compelled by the authorities to stand constantly on his head. He was tired of making an effort to combat these demons. Had Wilhelmina Ford, Marna Frost, or even Imperia Starling entered his cell that night and offered him his liberty in exchange for a comformation with her desire — he had no very clear idea in any instance of what this actually would be — it is likely he would have yielded. This thought was immediately followed by the pendent belief that on the whole he was safer in jail. Had not the terror of his unknown misdemeanour haunted him, he might have been quite content to languish there where, after all, he was protected from further attacks from alien sources.

The events of the past few days had, until now, driven the memory of Wilhelmina Ford quite out of his head. He had even forgotten to tell that part of his story to Jack. Considering her now, he wondered what had become of her, wondered whether she had been successful in *her* plan of escape. At least, he mused, she had one advantage in his eyes over the other creatures: she had not attempted to remodel him. For her silence and her absence he was glad to award her a halo, to thank her for playing this nega-

tive rôle in this western drama in which he seemed to be cast for the tortured hero.

According to tradition this was all wrong. It was, he easily recalled, the heroine who should be tortured in stories of the West. It was the heroine for whose virtue the heavy villain with the black mustachios hankered. It was the heroine who was attacked on lonely roads and locked in isolated ranch-houses. The hero's job was to save her at odd moments, for which nobility of action he was suitably rewarded with her heart and hand. In this, *his* story, he was indubitably playing the part ordinarily allotted to the heroine. If, indeed, his story contained a heroine at all, he was quite unable to identify her. The women in his story seemed jointly cast for the rôle traditionally performed so lustily by the villain with the black mustachios. There seemed to be no one trying to save the hero. Assuredly, he was unequal to the task of saving himself . . . unless, when he got out of jail — if he ever did get out of jail; it was difficult to foresee what would happen to him in this particular since he couldn't imagine what he had done to send him there at all — he might go back to New York. Even this eventuality did not seem plausible in prospect. The West, represented by its females, seemed to send out tentacles to grasp

him wherever he went. He had in no wise improved his situation by fleeing from Hollywood. On the whole, it was distinctly possible that he was worse off now than he had been under the roof-tree of Imperia Starling.

So, perturbed and nerve-shattered, he tossed and turned in his narrow bed, throwing the covers this way and that, arranging and re-arranging his pillow, twisting his toes, stretching, lying now on one side and now on the other, and counting sheep jumping over a fence until the woolly quadrupeds began to bear the aspect of a series of Imperia Starlings after him in frantic pursuit. At last the belated dawn eased some of his fears and excessive fatigue mercifully made it possible for him to sleep for an hour.

At eight o'clock the sheriff himself came into the room with Ambrose's breakfast on a tray, a rasher of bacon and eggs, and a pot of strong coffee.

Made by my own cook, Ed Randolph explained, and I wouldn't allow no one else to bring it to you. Any friend of Jack Story's a friend o' mine till he's hanged.

Ambrose started at the last word. He was bending over a washbowl with his face in the cooling water. As he looked up the cracked mirror informed him that his eyes were bloodshot.

What are you in for anyway? the sheriff inquired, as he set down the breakfast tray.

I don't know. I've done nothing.

They all says that, but Jack swears you're innocent, and what Jack says goes with me. Maybe you run over somebody in a car?

I haven't been driving a car.

Well, the laws of California is peculiar. . . . The sheriff scratched his ear and lighted his pipe. . . . You maya done somethin' without knowin' it.

I haven't done anything, Ambrose repeated doggedly, as he sat down to pour out his coffee, unless riding on a milkwagon is against the law.

Ridin' on a milkwagon! The sheriff guffawed. That wouldn't be a crime anywhere else, but maybe in California . . .

Or breaking down vines climbing out of a second-storey window.

Did you climb in first?

I was living there.

Did you take somethin' out with you?

Not even my own bags.

Well, maybe you're crazy, the sheriff suggested, peacefully puffing at his pipe. I shouldn't wonder if that's it. Ridin' on milkwagons and leavin' houses by

second-storey windows without takin' your bags along looks pretty peculiar.

They locked me in, Ambrose explained, his mouth full of ham.

Locked you in! Now what made 'em do that?

Because I wouldn't do what they wanted me to do.

What did they want you to do? The sheriff was walking slowly up and down the room.

Write a moving picture story.

Well, I can't make head or tail of it, sighed the sheriff, but if you're tellin' the truth why you've got somethin' on 'em. They couldn't hold you here a minute, unless you're crazy.

How soon will I know? Ambrose demanded eagerly.

They're comin' for you today . . . Here's Jack.

A keeper, indeed, had opened the door to permit Jack's entrance. His eyes were blazing, but the puffs underneath them and his unshaven cheeks testified to a sleepless night and a swift toilet. In fact it did not appear that he had undressed at all.

How are you, Ambrose? he inquired anxiously.

I guess I'm all right, Jack, the playwright replied. You look pretty bad.

I feel rotten. Ed, he asked the sheriff, when's this

funny business going to end? They've got to let Ambrose go. They haven't got a damn thing on him.

Looks to me, the sheriff responded meditatively, if he's tellin' the truth, he's got somethin' on them.

He's telling the truth all right, Jack declared bitterly. When are they coming?

I was just explainin' to your friend they wired they'd be here today.

Well, they'd better be. I'll telephone Washington if they don't come. I won't have this man in jail another night.

Not that I don't like it here, Ambrose inserted apologetically. You've treated me fine.

Don't you speak of it, the sheriff remarked light-heartedly. If you're a friend of Jack's you get the best there is till you hang. I promise you that.

The sheriff made his departure. For the rest of the morning Jack stayed by his friend and they talked of many things. Indeed, for Ambrose, it was the quietest and most delightful morning he had put in since leaving New York.

A little after noon the party from California arrived and was immediately ushered into Ambrose's room by the sheriff.

Jack's right, the sheriff announced. You're free.

Ambrose rose to face Imperia Starling, Herbert Ringrose, and a Los Angeles policeman.

Now, I'd like to know what all this is about! shouted Jack.

It was Ringrose who replied. Don't get excited, he said. Let's talk this over together quietly.

And who the devil are you? Jack cried.

Who are *you?* Ringrose demanded in turn.

You'll find out soon enough, Jack replied.

The California policeman grinned. Imperia sank into a chair and appeared to be ready to weep.

Addressing Ambrose, Ringrose adopted a more conciliatory tone. Imperia's done something very foolish, very foolish indeed, he was saying, but it was meant for your good and so I hope you'll forgive her. Imperia's impulsive and we all have to forgive her sometimes.

Imperia was weeping softly. It was perhaps characteristic of her that she could still inquire of Ambrose: How *could* you do it?

How could *you* do it? Jack demanded of her savagely. Then, turning to Ringrose, What in hell has she done?

Ambrose felt grateful that he had at last found a sympathetic and forceful mouthpiece.

Imperia was determined that Mr. Deacon should

furnish her with a script, Ringrose began to explain.

Yes, yes, I know all that, Jack interrupted impatiently.

If you will allow me to tell the story . . . Ringrose, it was evident, was making a fairly successful effort to control his temper.

Oh, go ahead! Jack said.

She had made an appointment for him to meet Schwarzstein, one of the head executives of Invincible. His time is valuable . . .

A hell of a lot we care about his time! Jack sputtered.

Ringrose glared at him, but continued: The night before this appointment Mr. Deacon climbs out of a window and disappears.

What in hell right had she to lock him up? Jack demanded. I guess he's a free agent.

This looks pretty bad, feller. The sheriff addressed Ringrose who seemed to be in charge of the case.

Imperia was moaning softly into her handkerchief.

It does look bad, sheriff, Ringrose admitted. It looks damn bad. I told you Imperia had been foolish. When she discovered that he had disappeared she lodged a complaint with the police, even said

some things were missing. They weren't, of course. She'd heard Mr. Deacon speak of going to Santa Fe and she made 'em wire here. All she wanted was to get him back. Schwarzstein will give you that contract all right. . . . He had turned to Ambrose. . . . Any kind of contract you want.

Well, unless I'm a dago with three legs somebody's going to pay for this! cried Jack.

Ambrose's mind did not dwell on retribution. Am I free? he inquired.

You bet you're free, the sheriff assured him.

But you'll come back with us, pleaded Ringrose. I've got the contract here ready for you to sign. Name your own terms.

Somebody's got to pay for this, Jack persisted. I think Miss Starling'll have to stand a big suit for damages.

Suppose you let Mr. Deacon tend to his own business, Ringrose snapped testily.

Suppose you take your own advice, Jack retorted.

I'm going back to New York, Ambrose avowed. I won't stay here another hour.

Oh, please, Mr. Deacon . . . the star was speaking at last . . . please come back to us. Please forgive us. I only did it to your good. I am sure what you and me can do together in the pictures.

Please, please forgive me and come back to us. I am so temperamental. I am sorry.

Imperia turned on her charm and playfully regarded the playwright with her most enchanting smile.

I am going back to New York, Ambrose repeated doggedly, adding emphatically, on the next train.

You're going . . . ? Quite unexpectedly, Jack interrupted himself and began to smile. . . . Ambrose, he inquired, have you still got that paper you showed me in your pocket?

The playwright fumbled in his coat and drew out the Griesheimer contract.

Good! cried Jack, as he handed his friend a fountain pen. Now you sign *that* or I'll have you arrested myself.

He spoke with so much force that Ambrose, tired of argument, tired of adventure, tired of everything, automatically opened the contract and signed his name on the proper line.

Taking the paper, Jack turned to the sheriff.

Now Ed, he ordered, you sign your name where it says witnessed by.

The sheriff obeyed and Jack made the document legal by adding his own signature.

Waving the contract in the faces of the now

thoroughly puzzled conspirators, Jack cried: We don't know yet what we'll do about a suit. That depends on lots of things. In the meantime I want you flatheads to know that my friend is engaged to write exclusively for L.L.B.

My God, Deacon, has it come to this, after all we've done for you? Ringrose cried.

The look of horror froze to hate on the exceedingly lovely countenance of Invincible's famous star, and with a spontaneity that did not appear to be too studied, she dropped to the floor in a swoon.

Bean soup and Santa Claus! was Jack Story's comment.

Twelve

Returning to California a week later, Ambrose registered at the Ambassador and was assigned to a room in Siesta directly facing the apartment occupied by Auburn Six. Communicating with her by telephone, he presently joined her for tea. The manner of the agreeable girl was sufficiently soothing to make him articulate to a degree and he related to her some of his amazing adventures in Santa Fe.

Schwarzstein didn't come down with them, did he? she asked.

No.

I thought not. He never appears. Nobody ever sees him. Sometimes I wonder if he exists. He once kept Imperia cooling her heels in his ante-room for eight hours. He had nerve to do that.

He certainly did, Ambrose responded fervently.

Auburn subsequently arranged an appointment with Griesheimer so that it was not long before Ambrose again found himself in the Circassian walnut environment of that impressive executive. On this occasion the magnate rose and walked across the room to greet his guest.

Well, Deacon, he cried, extending his great hand heartily, so you decided to join the Elks. You ain't going to be sorry. It's the wisest move you ever made.

I hope you won't regret it, said Ambrose. You know I told you I didn't know what I could do.

Griesheimer waved Ambrose to a chair and passed the box of cigars. Again Ambrose accepted one and stuck it in his waistcoat pocket.

There, there, said the great man, patting his new employee on the back as he stood over him, I like your modesty. . . . He returned to the chair in front of his desk. . . . I like your modesty. To speak the truth that's one of the reasons I believe in you. We get too many cocksure, I'll-tell-the-world fellows out here, many too many. They come out to reform the indus— the art. . . . He chuckled. . . . They go back pretty sore. You're beginning right. Go ahead on these lines and you should come out fine. Now . . . he leaned forward eagerly, even greedily . . . what's your idea for a feature for Auburn Six?

I told you . . . Ambrose began.

I know, I know. . . . Griesheimer frowned impatiently. . . . There ain't no use going over that. Well, she ain't the only star on this lot, although she's our grandest bet just now. We got Dick Ruby, just about the best juvenile in the business, and Polly

Cherry, and Rubin Landsgrave. . . . They should give you a list downstairs. Pretty nearly any story you should write'll hit some one. Only remember this: When you write a story for the pictures always keep in mind the great public that sees 'em. Think of the mothers and young girls that's going to sit out front. Purity first, that's the motto of L.L.B. Love, sure — even passion, but keep your story moral. Never forget the wages of sin is death, but if the motives is moral you can get in quite a lot o' necking.

Say, we like to get necking into the pictures — it helps trade — but don't have any girls expecting to be mothers. It may be real life but it ain't reel life. . . . He laughed uproariously at his pun before he proceeded: I been thinking over your case a lot since you come in here the other day — I knew you'd be back — and I decided the best way for you to get acquainted with the game is to talk it over with one of our bright boys.

We got a whole factory full o' bright boys getting paid for just such emergencies. They ain't so much on writing themselves, but give 'em something to dig their teeth into and they're full of ideas about hair-breadth escapes and emotional close-ups. Besides they fool around a lot and see all the previews and releases. They know the game. Now take a fellow

like you that's new to the business, you're sure to be chock-full of novel ideas. Some of 'em should be practical. Well, the bright boys'll know. Picture stories ain't written, they're rewritten. You'd be surprised at what goes on with a story here before it reaches me. And when I get it, Griesheimer added significantly, I write it all over again.

I'm not reflecting on your abilities, Deacon. I know you know how to write a play, but a moving picture ain't a play. It's as different as night from noon. After you've done a picture you should understand the game better.

The great man, seemingly unaware that Ambrose had not spoken during this address, pressed a button which summoned his secretary.

Take Mr. Deacon down to Phil Lawrence, he commanded. Phil's expecting him. Then: Good-bye, Deacon, and good luck. I should see you in a few days.

Ambrose, behaving very much like an excellent sheep with an overworked heart, followed the secretary down the corridor and out into the open. The sight that met his eyes was entirely novel to him: two huge buildings of galvanized iron, marked Stage No. 8 and Stage No. 4, loomed up before him. Through the opening between the two he could see the façade

of a Venetian palace built over a practical canal on which gondolas floated in real water. The space in front of the stages was devoted to a garden intersected by walks on which actors in costumes and make-up dashed about in all directions. Out of a circular pool in the centre a fountain played.

Following the secretary around the corner of Stage No. 8, Ambrose came upon a two-storey structure with a balcony, approached by a flight of exterior steps. Both on the ground and balcony floors this building was honeycombed with doors. Mounting the staircase, they walked along the balcony until the secretary tapped on a door on which was painted the name of Philip Lawrence.

Come in, was the cheery invitation.

The secretary pushed the door open and Ambrose, entering, stood in a cubicle furnished with two chairs and a table. A roughly painted sign on the wall informed inquisitive visitors that fifty million Frenchmen can't be wrong. A young man with a snub nose, dark eyes, and violently red hair sat before the table with his feet upon it. Apparently he was devoting all his energies to smoking a pipe.

Hello, he cried, before the secretary had time to speak, I'll bet you're Ambrose Deacon!

Ambrose nodded and accepted the proffered hand. The secretary discreetly withdrew.

Sit down, Deacon, Phil Lawrence urged. Heard a lot about you in New York from Jack Story.

Ambrose brightened at once. So you're a friend of Jack's!

Yes, best of friends. He doesn't know I'm out here though. He'd probably think I was Humpty Dumpty. Jack never could take the deaf-and-dumb racket seriously. I'm out here to clean up, he went on, and after I get my roll I'll fly back to Broadway et comment!

It's great luck for me to find a friend of Jack's here, Ambrose replied with real fervour.

Same here, Lawrence declared. You must be a wonder. Most guys write and write and try and try and don't get a look-in out here. Now you walk right in as if you were going to stay.

I don't know about that. Jack made me come.

Well, I'm sunk! Jack made you give the came-the-dawners the once-over? I'll believe anything after that. Honestly, Deacon, pass me the syrup. What are you doing out here? You're the last man in the world I'd pick to turn out the tripe they crave.

I don't know why I'm out here. I had damn little to do with it, I'll tell you that.

Get me, kid, Phil Lawrence explained. I'll say

your show's great. It's got all the mean motives and petty nastinesses of peasants anywhere. I saw it when I was down East last month. But that stuff wouldn't go here. When you put cabots in front of the mystery box they've got to behave as pretty and innocuous as a Christmas card or a magazine cover by Harrison Fisher.

I guess I know. I saw a picture called Golden Dreams.

Well, you saw one of the worst, but that's what they want! I suppose you've got a practical streak in you somewhere so you can turn out masterpieces with your hands and hokum with your feet.

I have no such talent, Ambrose admitted. I don't know how to go about it at all.

Well, I do, averred Philip Lawrence. That's where Phil comes in. So shoot.

Shoot?

Sure. Relate your pretty fable to me and I'll dirty it up for you.

I haven't got any pretty fable, Ambrose confessed helplessly.

Philip Lawrence stared at him in amazement. But they wanted you, didn't they? They must have liked your story to give you a contract.

I never told them a story. They *made* me sign a

contract. I told Griesheimer exactly what I've just told you and all he did was to add a few figures to his original offer.

Philip Lawrence laughed loudly.

Say bo, he cried, you know your groceries. That's just the technique that captures these gorillas, but do you mean to tell me you're on the level?

Never more so. I haven't an idea for a film story in my head.

Now Lawrence actually howled. I've got to hand it to you, he said at last. You've beat these crooks at their own game.

Ambrose was feeling entirely at home: Phil Lawrence was almost Jack Story.

How? he inquired.

Why, the old man is so used to goofer authors greasing themselves without swimming the channel that you must have driven him wild. You see he thought you had a Ming vase that you were pretending came out of Vantine's basement. But what I'd like to know is how he ever got hold of you at all, how you happened to come out here.

It's a long story.

I'll loan you the use of the hall.

It was both a pain and a relief for Ambrose to outline his adventures from the time he had boarded the

Twentieth Century until he had left Griesheimer's office: a pain to recall some of the episodes, a relief to share his confidence with some one he believed to by sympathetic. He even added to what he had told Jack Story the episodes of Abel Morris, Wilhelmina Ford, and Marna Frost, more to get them out of his pent-up heart than because he believed they had anything to do with the situation. Lawrence followed the narrative with close attention, greeting certain items with chuckles or exclamations of delight, and occasionally interrupting the history outright to indulge in an explosion of mirth. When Ambrose had concluded, Lawrence breathed a pensive Whew! and then sat musing in profound silence.

By Petronius, he cried at last, I think we've got it!

Got what? demanded the bewildered Ambrose.

Material for a super-special. It's a push-over. Lawrence was ebullient in his enthusiasm.

But I don't understand. You don't mean that . . .

Exactly.

this is film material? Ambrose insisted on finishing his sentence.

The best.

Well, I'll be God damned! Astonishment alone could have caused Ambrose to resort to profanity.

We'll have to change it about a bit, alter it here and there, shift the locale, modify the motives, add a few characters, but when it's done, O garçon!

It's no good for Auburn Six, Lawrence went on after a pause. Dick Ruby is our star. The best kid ham on the coast. I've even got the title: Spider Boy.

Spider . . . ?

Boy, Lawrence repeated firmly. Don't you know about the male spiders?

No, Ambrose admitted, I don't.

The females eat 'em and the males try to escape. That's our story, and what a line for billing: Richard Ruby in Spider Boy! There's something that will sit pretty in electric bulbs.

But can you put Imperia Starling and Griesheimer and all the others in films?

Oh, the picture won't have anything to do with *that*. Our theme — *your* theme — is the pursuit of the male by the female. They'll pursue him in aeroplanes, in motor-boats, on bicycles, in catamarans, canoes, coracles, gondolas, and luggers, in brigs, clippers, yawls, and junks, in trucks, jinrickshas, landaus, and droshkies, in Marmons, Rolls-Royces, Jordans, Chevrolets, Buicks, and Citroëns, on Arabian steeds, zebras, elephants, and camels. They'll even

pursue him on foot. By Buddha, what a theme for S.A.!

S.A.?

Sex appeal. And Dick Ruby's got it. Dick Ruby's got IT. Ke-rist, what a lovely old picture! In his enthusiasm Lawrence barked a resounding Woof! Woof!

To say that Ambrose experienced a sense of relief would be a negative way of expressing his feelings, although he did not comprehend what had happened any more clearly than he had comprehended his previous adventures in this legendary world. Apparently, Fate held him firmly by the hand and was leading him on and on. Even now his good sense warned him that she would eventually drop him in some particularly muddy ditch, but at any rate he was beginning to believe that Griesheimer would receive something for his money. So, for the present, there was nothing to worry about. It had all turned out so much simpler than he expected it would do. Jack had been right after all: he, Ambrose, had been a fool not to sign up earlier.

Well, he replied to Lawrence, if you think it's all right, let's get to work. What do I do first?

Lawrence laughed again.

You don't think I'd make a fellow that's collecting

as much jack as you are do anything! he exclaimed. Do! Play around with the girls. Go to the movies. Lunch at the Montmartre and bathe at Santa Monica. I'll get you a bid to the Mayfair Club dances. Get drunk: I'll give you my bootlegger's telephone number and the addresses of several hush-houses. You might even put on the nosebag with me a few evenings, if you want to.

I'd like that best of all, Ambrose replied honestly.

Good. Where are you stopping?

The Ambassador.

Well, give me a day or so to think over this machine. After I have sorted out the pieces we can talk it over. Now I'll get a car for you.

Lifting the receiver of his telephone he called the gateman to whom he said: Studio car right away for Mr. Deacon. Ask for it when you go out, he instructed Ambrose. It'll be there. . . . Shaking Ambrose's right hand warmly, Lawrence patted him on the back with his left. Well, old chap, he assured him, you're a wonder and we've got it. We've got IT.

Ambrose hesitated. There's one thing I'd like to ask you, he said diffidently.

Pull the trigger.

I don't know exactly how to explain it, but don't

you think everybody's been a little queer? I mean Mama Starling, for instance, and Count Supari, to say nothing of Imperia and Ringrose. They all seem so intense.

Lawrence shouted.

You mustn't take 'em seriously, Deacon. They all dramatize things, not only life, but every incident in life. You'll get used to it if you stay out here awhile.

I didn't know, said Ambrose, and I don't think I'll stay out here very long. Then, Good-bye, and thank you for all you've done for me.

Done for *you!* I only wish half the authors they ship out here had half as great an idea as you have.

Ambrose almost bounded down the staircase, across the lot, around Stage No. 8, through the garden with the fountain, on to the office where the doorboy announced not without obsequiousness, Your car is here, Mr. Deacon.

In the waiting-room beyond the gate a girl who had been sitting on a bench rose swiftly and approached him.

How are you, Mr. Deacon?

Startled, he looked into the eyes of Wilhelmina Ford.

Miss . . . ! he cried, extending a limp hand.

She smilingly inquired where he was going.

To the Ambassador.

May I go with you? I've been trying without success to get a car for ever so long.

He followed her out through the swinging door and helped her into the automobile.

Thirteen

Mr. Deacon, I believe you're afraid of me!

Thus Wilhelmina Ford opened her conversation with Ambrose sitting beside her in the car. In ordinary circumstances this remark would have been quite sufficient to create the condition to which she referred, but Philip Lawrence had relieved Ambrose of so much immediate anxiety that for the moment he was too light-hearted to easily lose his composure.

His actual reply was: I never talk much.

You've never had much of an opportunity to talk to me, Wilhelmina remarked. The last time I saw you I told you the story of my life — what there was of it.

I remember.

I thought you would. I hope nothing I said then frightened you.

He looked at her: she appeared to be serious. Her voice sounded warm and natural. He forced a smile and muttered bravely, You couldn't mean that, what you said about . . . . He hesitated.

I did mean it. Whatever happens I shall

always regard you as one of the great influences in my life.

Ambrose was too embarrassed to speak. Whether she was serious or whether she was poking fun at him, he could not be sure: it was bad enough either way. Fortunately, she changed the subject abruptly.

What are you doing? she demanded.

I'm writing a story for the films, he responded, deciding quite unexpectedly that he couldn't tell the whole truth and be loyal to Lawrence.

L.L.B.? I'm with them too.

So you got what you wanted?

Not without a struggle.

Pausing, she offered Ambrose an opportunity to ponder over this remark. It seemed curious to him, who had struggled so ineffectually to escape from it, that any one should have to struggle to become a part of this fantastic industry.

You see, she went on, when I came here I went right to the casting agency and a young woman in charge wanted to buy me a ticket straight back home. I told her I lived in Quebec too, she added with a smile. She informed me that there were already six thousand beautiful women in Hollywood and part-time jobs for about three hundred. I argued that there must always be room at the top and she in-

formed me that no one ever began at the top. I reminded her of Zoë Claire and she retaliated by suggesting that if my relations with Schwarzstein or any other executive were as intimate as Zoë's there would be no need of my visiting a casting agency. I replied that I'd like to begin at the top without going through any of those little formalities. She telephoned to the railroad station to book my passage. While she was telephoning, I ran away.

Next I tried the studios, one after the other. No good. I asked for one director after another. Not one did I see. The boys at the door always referred me to the casting agency. I had already been there. However, I wasn't discouraged.

I should have been, sighed Ambrose.

Oh, you! You're a great author and everybody wants *you,* but they're fed up on beautiful women. Have you ever before seen so many beautiful women? she demanded.

I d-d-don't think I've noticed, Ambrose stammered. You see I haven't been out much. At least, part of the time I've spent at Santa Fe. I . . .

Well, the place is completely overrun with them. Girls from St. Louis and Baltimore and Portland, Maine. Girls from the Berkshires and the Everglades and the Catskills and the Black Hills. Girls

from the plains of Nebraska, the farms of Illinois, and the plantations of Georgia. Any girl who isn't cross-eyed and hasn't a crooked nose makes tracks for California to cash in on her face. Some of 'em arrived before they put up the bars. Now they buy 'em tickets and send 'em back home, but those who got here before they adopted this plan, the six thousand, most of 'em, went to work as shop-girls in department stores or drug-stores, or as waitresses in bakeries or lunch-rooms, or as telephone girls — well, poor things, they got what they could. They look so appealingly out of their big eyes at every male who comes within the line of their vision that at first I thought they were flirting, but they're only banking on the chance that any man may be a director and hoping they'll get a break.

The more Ambrose heard about this fabulous land he was inhabiting for the present, the more he marvelled.

Is that what you did? he inquired.

Not me! Not much! They never get anything, these girls. I learned that at once. They use the wrong technique. Do you know what I discovered? Shall I tell you my secret?

Please do.

I hadn't been here three days before I began to

understand that the only people they really want out here are the people who don't want *them*.

Aghast at this display of perspicacity, Ambrose ejaculated, So you too found that out!

It appeared that Wilhelmina Ford was far too interested in her own story to fathom the implications of this remark, for she merely replied, Certainly, very briskly, and continued: With this valuable bit of information inside my head I was forced to lay out an entirely new campaign. I went to stop with my friend at Pasadena. It was better anyway, as I had told my mother I was going there. Next I looked over my wardrobe and finding it extremely unsatisfactory, I laid in a fresh supply of dresses, shoes, and hats. It's easy to get nice frocks here, there's such a demand for them. Then I got my friend to introduce me to a lot of dancing young men who were only too eager to escort me to the places I wanted to go: the Montmartre for lunch on the right days, and the Cocoanut Grove at the Ambassador for supper on the right nights. I can tell you I was no wallflower. In a week I was famous, she remarked complacently.

I should think you would have been! cried Ambrose, whose admiration for this girl increased with his wonder.

Famous! she repeated. Besides which I was having a grand time. The young men were not much on brains, but they were long on looks and they danced like Fred Astaire. When I went to bed at night I felt more bitter than ever about all those wasted years in Kansas City. Why, if I'd stayed there another six months I'd have become a withered old lady as conventional as the next one! I tell you I love to realize that I had nerve enough to break away!

She paused to light a cigarette before she went on: I hadn't been going out for much more than a minute before the boys began to ask me if I were in the movies. I laughed scornfully. Me in motion pictures! How could they think such a thing! Nothing, I assured them, would induce me to cheapen myself to that extent. The idea appalled me. If I said this to one man I said it to forty. The women — she made a grimace — did not seem to be so curious. Well, in a few days I became a fable, a legendary character: the only pretty girl in the United States who didn't want to be a motion picture actress. It was unheard of! It was epic!

Ambrose was impressed by the magnitude of the impression he was certain she must have produced.

Then one day at the Montmartre, a handsome roughneck was introduced to me. It was Martell

Hallam, star director for L.L.B. I was thrilled, but I didn't show it.

I hear you hate pictures, Miss Ford, he said.

I never said that, Mr. Hallam, I replied. I admire pictures very much. I enjoy going to see them. What I said was that I would never act in pictures.

Why not? I hardly seen a face so right for the screen. Let's make a test of you.

Never! I cried with as much indignation as I could assume.

Well, well, he replied, will you dance with me?

That, Mr. Hallam, I'd be delighted to do.

He danced very badly, but I didn't mind that. You can't expect a man who knows so much about screen values to be able to control his feet properly. When we returned to the table I invited him to sit down. He urged me to reconsider my decision. I pleasantly but firmly refused. Why not a test anyhow? he pleaded. I replied that I couldn't see any sense in making a test since I had no intention of going into pictures. But, he protested, if you're all wet as screen material I'll rest easy. If I don't get a test I'll always mourn your loss. We argued for some time. Finally I allowed myself to be persuaded, assuring him at the same time that I was only doing it to please him and

certainly wouldn't go into pictures even if I filmed like Auburn Six and Imperia Starling combined.

When he made an appointment his parting words were: Don't wear white if you got anything else.

I chuckled to myself. There wasn't a trick of photography or make-up I hadn't studied.

So you made a test? Ambrose inquired.

Yes, and it was so successful that Hallam wept when I persisted that it would be quite impossible for me to join his troupe, but in the end, she concluded, I allowed myself to be persuaded.

And now, she said, as the car stopped before the Ambassador, why don't you come over to my bungalow and tell me *your* story while you drink a cocktail?

My story isn't very interesting, he lied. I just came out here and L.L.B. engaged me.

That's what surprised me, she remarked, as they walked under the pergola towards the bungalow. I thought surely Herbert Ringrose would get you for Invincible.

Ambrose had nothing to say on this subject, but as she turned into the walk which led to Siesta, he demanded in amazement, Do you live here?

Yes, upstairs.

I live here too, he said in great excitement.

He was still more amazed to observe that she did not find anything unusual in this statement. Without replying, she guided him to her room on the second floor, a room too full of French dolls and framed photographs to suit her personality, he thought.

She answered his unspoken criticism: I rented this hideous place just as it is. It's Bernice Laly's apartment. She's in Europe. I guess it will do till I find something of my own. So far I've been too busy to look. Why, I haven't even got a mama yet!

Ambrose grinned. Going to get one? he inquired.

Of course. You can't be a film star and live without a mama — unless you get married. Maybe my own mother will come out. If not, I'll find something, and it'll be good too.

Does your family know you are in the movies?

No. I haven't told 'em yet. You see, I'm doing a small part with Dick Ruby, Hallam directing. I'm not a star yet. I may be rotten. I want to see how the picture turns out. They might cut me out altogether. They do that sometimes.

I don't believe they'll do it to you.

Neither do I.

Wilhelmina tossed her hat to the top of the upright piano, combed her shingled hair before a mirror, and called her maid to order cocktails. Then leading Ambrose to her balcony overlooking the spreading lawn of the Ambassador, she invited him to be seated in a wicker arm-chair.

That's my door down there. He pointed.

Is it? she queried listlessly. Whatever are you thinking about? she asked, after a pause.

Unable to find an answer at once, he eventually brought out, I was thinking Hollywood isn't so bad, after all.

Bad! I should think not! You ought to try Kansas City for a while.

The maid came to them with two ruby glasses filled with cocktails and a shaker on a tray.

Ruth makes magnificent cocktails, Wilhelmina announced, swallowing half the contents of her glass. Now what has she put into this one, I wonder? I found a pickled walnut at the bottom of my glass last time, but it gave just the right touch. This one tastes as if it had celery in it.

Ambrose thought it did.

She poured out two more as she stared fixedly at her guest.

Mr. Deacon, she asked, did you take me seriously when I told you I thought I might marry you?

Flushing and gulping, Ambrose emitted a hollow laugh and stammered, No-o, of course not. How could I?

She still stared at him as she declared: Well, I half meant it. Maybe I mean it still. You see, you are a kind of symbol to me.

Please, Miss Ford, he protested, adding, to his own great surprise, You are beautiful!

Apparently she did not hear this. She went on: You stand for a good deal to me. If I hadn't become interested in you I might never have found strength to drag myself out of the awful rut I was in. You see, I thought you were a great man.

But you don't any more!

Mr. Deacon, I'm a little disappointed that you have gone into the movies.

But . . .

I think it's all right for women to fool their time away in this circus. It's probably as good a thing as a woman with looks and no other way to support herself can find to do. It's all right for some men too, but you are a great writer, and I don't like to see

you mixed up in this bowl of mush. I'm afraid you'll be spoiled.

Steadying himself, Ambrose lifted the shaker, poured out a third cocktail which he swallowed at a gulp, and demanded, Miss Ford, may I tell you a secret?

I adore secrets, she replied. Aren't you going to give *me* a cocktail?

In filling her glass, he spilled enough liquor to fill another.

I quite agree with you, he brought out at last.

But I don't understand. . . . A quizzical expression appeared in her eyes.

About this job. I hate it. I didn't want to do it.

Then why did you?

He couldn't answer this question without telling the whole long story again. He compromised by saying, Of course I'm not the great writer you think I am.

Ambrose — I'm going to call you Ambrose after this — I *know* you are a great writer. Why did you? she persisted.

Ambrose writhed. How could he tell this girl that he had been too weak to say no? Again he compromised: It's only for a little while.

Still she stared at him. Was she laughing inside? he wondered.

Perhaps I'd like to have you stay here till I'm a star so that you could write a picture for me.

But I'm only engaged for one picture, Ambrose cried.

Oh, they'll keep you, if you want to stay. They'll probably offer you more to go to one of the other lots and then Griesheimer will double the offer. Who's going to do your first picture?

Something was said about Dick Ruby.

Then you're a hit. Dick never made a failure. You can write the dictionary if you want to. It won't make any difference. Everybody — absolutely everybody in the world — goes to see his pictures. What's your picture called, Ambrose?

Spider Boy.

What a marvellous title! she cried in delight. What does it mean?

Oh, it's all about a man who's pursued by women in broughams . . . and wagons . . . and wheelbarrows and balloons. You know, the female spider swallows the male. I don't think I ought to be telling you this — I think it's a secret.

Oh, I shan't tell anybody. I can't say I'm crazy about the idea. I don't think it's psychologically true.

You see, I've been chased too much by men. It's even worse here than it was in Kansas City.

The penalty of beauty, he surprisingly found himself saying.

Why, Ambrose!

Wilhelmina . . .

That's not my name, she announced unexpectedly.

Not your . . . !

It will do for the present. I hate to be untruthful. I couldn't lie to *you,* Ambrose. I admire you too much. I didn't want to mix my family up with my professional life, so I decided to adopt an alias. I made it up out of the names of the Queen of Holland and Henry, she confessed. I think it's a very good picture name, don't you? Wilhelmina Ford in Girls Will Be Women. That'll look very pretty on the ashcans. Or Wilhelmina Ford in Fine Feathers Do Not Make Fine Flappers, or — well, you can see for yourself.

Are you serious?

I'm always serious, and let me tell you something else, Ambrose, I shouldn't be at all surprised if I carried out my original intention and married you.

I think I'd like it!

She laughed. Peut-être jamais, peut-être demain, mais pas aujourd'hui: c'est certain.

I don't understand French.

She laughed again. I was quoting Carmen, she explained. It means, Don't be silly. Anyhow I expect you to take me to the Montmartre for lunch tomorrow.

Fourteen

The next morning Ambrose awakened, for the first time in California, in an actually beatific mood. Circumstances had considerably altered his point of view. Aspects of the community hitherto distasteful no longer aroused his anxiety. Imperia Starling and Herbert Ringrose apparently were merely episodes in his past. The onerous obligations he had assumed in signing a contract with L.L.B. had been miraculously lifted from his shoulders by the optimistic and beneficent Philip Lawrence. Especially and entirely pleasant had been his re-encounter with Wilhelmina Ford. In a word, he was as contented this morning as he expected to be until he was permitted to return to his secluded apartment and become a forgotten nobody, assuredly his highest ambition.

Outside the sun was bright. From his window he gazed across the green lawn, between the bamboo and the palms. Humming a few bars of an old music hall tune, he lifted the receiver to order his breakfast. A little later he plunged about in his bath like a playful sea-lion. The arrival of the waiters with the warming containers and the table with its white na-

pery, its china, its shining silver, and its glittering glass, a rose carnation beside his plate, increased his cheer. Wrapping his dressing-gown well about him, he seated himself to lift the cover from his casserole of ham and eggs, to munch his toast Melba, and to pour out his coffee. At this juncture his eye discovered a telegram and three or four letters lying on the cloth. Slitting the flap with his butter-knife he opened the telegram first. It was from Harold Edwards, his manager, who wired that as The Stafford Will Case was still playing to capacity in New York he had decided to send a second company at once to Chicago. Ambrose received this information with a certain sense of pride, but there was nothing in the situation which called for action on his part. It merely assured him of yet further additions to his income. He could foresee the hour, rapidly approaching, when he might put away a competency which in the future would be his protective shield against the encroachments of the world. In a few months, what with Spider Boy and The Stafford Will Case pouring gold into his lap, he would be able to bury himself, if he so desired, in the forests of Cochin China.

He awakened sufficiently from his reverie to sip his coffee, eat a morsel of ham, and remove the contents from a second envelope. They informed him

that a certain photographer would consider it a great honour if Mr. Deacon would consent to sit for his portrait. A third envelope contained an invitation for him to speak at a dinner given by the Los Angeles Writers' Club. A fourth delivered up a note written in a long, scrawling hand which began, Dear Mr. Deacon. Turning the sheet, he was astonished to discover the signature of Imperia Starling. He read the note through:

Dear Mr. Deacon,

I am sending your bags by messenger. What have you been wearing, but I just learned your address.

I am giving a *very small* dinner on Friday for twenty or thirty people among which I want very much to include you. I hope you will find it possible to come. Mama sends her love.

faithfully and admiringly,

Imperia Starling.

He read this over three times before he was sure that he understood it. Then he examined the chirography more carefully. It was the kind of artificial, backhand writing often affected by boarding-school girls with unformed characters. There was certainly nothing of the petulant or aggressive Imperia in this letter and yet, considering what his reply to it should be, his past experience with the lady was inclined to make him wary.

The telephone bell rang.

Yes, this is Mr. Deacon.

O Mr. Deacon, you don't know me, but I wish you would see me. The voice was female and honeyed.

What about? Occasionally, the effect of Ambrose's shyness was to make his speech sound rather brisk.

I'd rather see you to talk with you if you *would* be good enough to arrange an appointment.

I don't even know your name.

My name is Gladys Lincoln. Do please be good enough to see me.

I'm ill, Ambrose cried in desperation. Can't you tell me what you want to see me about?

Well, I'd rather you'd *see* me. You could judge better that way. I want you to give me a part in your new film, Spider Boy. I am five feet, one, I have chestnut hair, blue eyes . . .

But Spider Boy isn't even written yet, he protested, in amazement that the world had heard about it so soon.

That's just why I called you up, Miss Lincoln announced. I wanted to get in ahead. If you saw me, perhaps you would write a special part for me. I could try on a Persian costume for you . . .

A Persian costume!

Why, yes. . . . This spoken with surprise.

Why a Persian costume?

It's a Persian picture, isn't it?

How do you know that?

Why, Mr. Deacon, *everybody* knows that — this, reproachfully. . . . It's in the Barometer this morning.

In the Barometer! Ambrose was shouting. I'm sick, he reiterated. I can't see any one. I've got measles.

O Mr. Deacon, I've had 'em! I don't care. If I could only see you . . .

But I have nothing to do with the casting. . . . He summoned enough wit to hang up the receiver.

Returning, considerably shaken, to his breakfast, he was again interrupted presently by a boy with his bags and a large package. He requested the boy to return with a copy of the Barometer. The package when opened proved to contain a hundred Meridiana Kohinoor cigars. There was a card from Ben Griesheimer.

The telephone bell tinkled. A voice at the other end of the line informed him sweetly that Miss Henrietta Ritchie of the Writers' Club was conversing with him. Had he received an invitation from the Club this morning? Was he coming to speak? Be-

cause so much had to be done in the way of preparation. Announcement cards had to be printed. Ambrose, to whom a public dinner was no more agreeable a prospect than an electric chair, contrived to imagine an important appointment with Griesheimer.

But we can make it any night, Miss Ritchie insisted.

My time is not my own at present.

But, Mr. Deacon, I don't think you quite understand. I am speaking for the Writers' Club, the WRITERS' CLUB.

Mr. Deacon understood.

You needn't be rude, Mr. Deacon.

Whew! He hung up the receiver.

The boy returned with the newspaper and a telegram. Ambrose opened the latter first. From Jack Story, it read: Congratulations old boy. This was a reply to a wire of information he had sent Jack the night before. Turning his attention to the Barometer, with some difficulty in his present state of mind, he located the column devoted to motion picture activities. His name, he perceived, lurked in the very first paragraph:

The mysterious appearance in our midst of Ambrose Deacon, the distinguished author of the current New York stage success,

The Stafford Will Case, is at last explained. Mr. Deacon has signed a contract with L. L. B. and is at present engaged in writing a script for a super-special to be called Spider Boy, a romantic comedy with a Persian setting. While no casting for this picture has yet been announced, we can predict with some certainty that the part of the Persian Princess will be the next starring vehicle of Auburn Six whose popularity with the fans is increasing with every new release. To study the star at close range, Mr. Deacon has moved into a bungalow at the Ambassador.

Flinging the newspaper aside, Ambrose stared into space.

Good God! he exclaimed, and then began to laugh hysterically. . . . He had time to gulp down a swallow of cold coffee before the telephone tinkled again.

Mr. Deacon?

Yes.

This is Elaine Galahad. I want to see you about a part in Spider Boy. . . . The voice possessed a resonant assurance.

Ambrose hung up the receiver at once. After a nervous turn or two about the room he bethought himself of a remedy. He requested the operator not to connect any further speaker without previously announcing his name. While he was dressing, the telephone bell sounded ten or twelve times more. As he listened to the operator repeating unknown name

after unknown name, he muttered, Mr. Deacon is not in. Tired at last, even of this procedure, he permitted the bell to tinkle unanswered.

A knock on his door abruptly taught him that there was one channel of communication he had forgotten to shut off. He called out, Come in! and awaited the entrance of a bellboy. Unexpectedly, he turned to face a strange young man with a distended brief-case under his arm.

Mr. Deacon, the intruder began, I hope you'll pardon me butting in on you like this, but they announced me at the desk and the reply was that you weren't in and I just had to see you.

Well, what . . . ?

Ambrose did not ask the young man to sit down and so he remained standing as he explained his errand. His name was Harry Galen. It seemed that he had been a New York newspaper man, but the lure of Hollywood had proven too strong for him. He had been trying unsuccessfully to place scenarios. Nobody would even look at his work.

I'm sure they're good, Harry Galen explained. You'd think so too.

What do you want me to do? Ambrose inquired.

Help me to get a break. You're the special pet of

Griesheimer at L.L.B. Ask him to read my stuff, will you?

I'll do what I can, Ambrose assured the young man. After all, I don't know anything about your work.

Just ask them to read it: that's all I want. And thank you a thousand times, Mr. Deacon.

Harry Galen dropped a card on the table and disappeared as suddenly as he had made his entrance.

Ambrose had adjusted his tie and put on his coat while Galen had been talking to him. Now he decided that apparently the only hope of escape from annoyance was to go out. He picked up his hat and stick and started off towards Wilshire Boulevard.

Presently, passing a drug-store, he recalled that he had coughed a good deal during the night, and entered to buy some cough-drops. The sole attendant in the shop was one of the most beautiful girls Ambrose had ever seen. As he hesitantly gave his order, she stared at him so intently that instinctively he lowered his eyes and flushed. He suddenly remembered what Wilhelmina had told him.

I'm not a director, he managed to explain.

I know you're not, Mr. Deacon, but oh, haven't you a part for me in Spider Boy?

Ambrose fled from the shop.

As Wilhelmina was working on the L.L.B. lot and would drive directly from Culver City, it had been arranged between them that they should meet at the Montmartre at one o'clock. Arriving a few minutes early, Ambrose made his way up the crowded staircase to the ante-room separated by a rope from the dining-room. A mob of men and women already surged against this rope, but Paul, the suave maître d'hôtel, in spite of pleading and tears, permitted no one to pass who had not already engaged a table. However, the name of Wilhelmina Ford, murmured by Ambrose, lifted the rope aside.

Nearly every table in the large room was already occupied. A band was playing and the space in the centre of the floor was filled with dancers. As a waiter ushered him to the table reserved for Wilhelmina, he passed many dazzling girls. Several of these brilliant women were stars whose pictures he recalled having seen in the newspapers; others, probably, were persons who had come to stare at the cinema actresses. Ambrose sensed suddenly that they were staring at *him*. Embarrassed, he averted his eyes. He could understand how the announcement of the imminent production of Spider Boy might create

for him a local celebrity, but he could not comprehend how it was that so many people already knew him by sight. It was a relief to remember that the disgraceful episode of the milkwagon lay in his more nearly anonymous past.

Seating himself, almost immediately he felt the light touch of a gloved hand on his shoulder, and turned to confront Imperia standing. She appeared rather soft and gentle in a beige chiffon frock with green orchids pinned to her shoulder and an enormous brown velvet hat. Rising, he stammered a greeting.

Mr. Deacon, I am delighted, she exclaimed radiantly, to read the news. What is good news for you is good news for me, *always*. I may count on you for Friday, she announced rather than inquired.

In his excessive embarrassment he nodded assent.

Till Friday then, she whispered, clasped his hand, and returned to her own table. Ambrose, before he sat down, caught a glimpse of Count Jaime sitting there. Imperia's place was behind him so that he could not see her when he was seated, but the welcome face of Auburn Six smiled over a table a few yards in front of him. Joining her, he was introduced

to a young man with a profile that made it impossible to doubt he was a screen favourite. Auburn's mother completed the party.

Sit down, please, Auburn invited. Are you expecting some one?

I'm lunching with Wilhelmina Ford, he explained, but she isn't here yet.

Wilhelmina Ford? Don't know her. I want to thank you for what you have done for me.

Done for *you*? . . . He was bewildered. . . . I should be thanking you.

Nonsense. I was only selfish when I took you to Griesheimer. I thought you might do a story for me. Besides, she went on more jocularly, I like to annoy Imperia. She is so possessive. And now you have created this adorable Spider Boy!

But I thought . . . they told me . . . Dick Ruby, he sputtered tactlessly.

Dick Ruby! in a picture with me! . . . She laughed. . . . Mother, that *is* a joke.

The young man with the profile agreed that it was.

Ambrose was wondering what to say. Philip Lawrence had assured him that his story was for a male star, but after all, now that it appeared to have a

Persian setting . . . ? A new figure fortunately joined them and relieved him of the responsibility of further comment on this subject.

Well, hello, cried the jaunty Capa Nolin. Mr. Deacon, you are quite the hero of the hour. I've heard your name mentioned more often this morning than anybody else's! For the moment people have even stopped gossiping about Scandia's affair with Denis Harvey.

I haven't done a thing, protested Ambrose.

You'll learn in a short while — won't he, Auburn? — that it isn't necessary to do much to be talked about here. All that is required is to *be* somebody and you're certainly that!

I don't know . . . Pardon me . . . Ambrose interrupted himself . . . the lady I'm lunching with has just come in.

Capa Nolin cast a glance in the direction of the indicated table.

The charming Miss Ford! she exclaimed. Imperia, Auburn, and now the new Wilhelmina! How fast you are getting on with our lovely ladies, Mr. Deacon!

Who is she? Auburn demanded.

You ought to know. She's doing her first picture, but it's on your lot. Hallam was enthusiastic about

her test. I understand her father owns all the gold mines in Alaska.

Oh, Martell! Auburn remarked, a little scornfully, Ambrose thought.

Extricating himself from this circle, he joined Wilhelmina.

I hate waiting for people, were her first words.

I'm sorry, he apologized as he seated himself opposite her. I've been here for some time.

Talking to Auburn Six. I know. You didn't send me any orchids, she went on abruptly.

I'm sorry, he said again. I didn't . . . He could feel that his face was scarlet.

Wilhelmina smiled. Why, you're blushing like a baby, Ambrose, she said. I can't scold you. It's too easy. Anyway you ought to be congratulated this morning. Everybody on the lot is talking about Spider Boy.

But it isn't written yet! Ambrose cried in desperation.

Are you quite sure? she demanded.

I ought to be.

But Griesheimer's been telling every one it's a masterpiece. How clever of you to lay it under a big top!

Big top?

Circus tent. I love the background. I think I may be in it if Auburn Six isn't too hateful about it.

Why, Ambrose exclaimed, she said she didn't know you.

Well, she doesn't. Perhaps she won't.

Ambrose felt certain that he was presently going to be afflicted with a splitting headache. He turned Wilhelmina's attention to the menu. Absent-mindedly, her eyes ran down the card as she suggested, You can get it for me.

Get what for you?

The part of the equestrienne in Spider Boy. You don't know what a good horsewoman I am. I wouldn't need a double. I once rode in a Pendleton round-up.

But what can I do?

What can you do? she mocked him. Talk to Griesheimer about me, of course. If Hallam directs the picture, *he's* for me.

The band was playing Sometimes I'm Happy.

What all the creatures were talking about Ambrose could have no idea and yet it was impossible for him to profess ignorance. He must bluff along until he might confer with Philip Lawrence.

What good would that do? he inquired dully.

Now, Ambrose, Wilhelmina declared, if you

don't behave I think I shall make you marry me after all!

His grin was sickly, as he muttered, I don't believe I should mind that.

Wilhelmina fairly shouted with laughter.

Really, Ambrose, she cried, you're gorgeous, simply gorgeous! You haven't any sense of humour at all, not a bit, not as much as would fit into an atom.

Ambrose felt very uncomfortable.

Fifteen

In the morning Ambrose was offered the opportunity to acquire information concerning the moving picture script he was currently supposed to be writing. Philip Lawrence telephoned to invite him to come to the studio for a conference. Excited and curious, Ambrose dressed hurriedly, jumped into a taxi, and drove to the L.L.B. lot in Culver City. The boy at the gate, on hearing the name of Mr. Deacon, escorted him personally to Philip's office.

Lawrence greeted him cordially. Here's a pipe, old man. I'm sure you prefer a pipe. Jack always did.

Accepting the proffered pipe, Ambrose made himself comfortable.

Did you see the Barometer yesterday? Philip inquired.

Yes. What does it all mean?

I don't know how they got the story: Lucile Logan always gets things ahead of anybody else. Part of it's true even.

Part of . . . ?

Sure. I guess she invented the Persian setting.

All Hollywood's been calling me up asking for jobs, Ambrose informed Lawrence.

Philip threw back his head and laughed. Of course they *would,* he said. I hadn't thought of that. What'd you tell 'em?

I had the 'phone shut off.

Right. You're getting on to this racket. Besides you won't have anything to do with the casting. Any old-timer would know that. It's these fresh new extra girls that don't understand. There's no chance for them anyway. Well, of course . . . Philip made a reservation . . . you could get your own dame in.

Ignoring this suggestion, Ambrose sought desired information. What's the real story? he inquired.

Philip showed signs of embarrassment. He knocked the ashes out of his pipe before he explained: You see, here — not only on this lot but on all the others — there are wheels within wheels. You've got to humour the executives. You've got to humour the directors. You've got to humour the stars. They're all just a lot of dumb kids. You can't do anything directly. You've got to approach 'em with wile.

Philip, looking guilty, paused. Ambrose with growing alarm demanded: What *have* you done?

Now, I don't want you to get excited. I only

did what I had to do. I had to think quick, I can tell you.

With Ambrose, anticipation invariably created panic. He could not readily imagine to what horrible reality these fatal words of Philip Lawrence pointed.

What have you done? he repeated faintly.

Well, after you left the other day I went in to see Griesheimer — naturally at his request. He wanted to know what kind of story you had proposed. I was prepared for that. I knew I'd have to tell him something at once. It's better so, after all. It saves trouble afterwards. I told him the idea that we had doped out together. He said that while this was a whale of an idea he didn't need any more material for Dick Ruby for the next six months.

But he told me an hour before that he wanted a story badly for Dick Ruby, Ambrose protested.

Naturally, Philip asserted coolly. You don't know these Arabs. It's part of their technique to object to anything that's proposed. Anyway he alleged that he wanted a yarn for Auburn Six. The story you told me the other day obviously wouldn't suit her. She couldn't be one of a number of heroines. You can see that.

So he wants to break our contract and let me out! Ambrose cried joyfully.

No! No! Lawrence responded in a tone of disgust. You don't get me at all. Let you out! I should say not. He wanted to know what other ideas you had handy. I had to do some pretty presto thinking, but I managed to tell him the other story you outlined to me.

The other . . . ?

Sure. Don't you remember? The one about the circus. Auburn is in love with a ceiling-walker, a human fly, and a clown's in love with her. The villain is the ring-master.

But I never . . .

Of course you did. Griesheimer swallowed the conte the way a boa constrictor swallows a rabbit, i.e., whole. I'm working on the continuity.

But Lawrence, this is *your* story. I refuse to accept credit for it. This lets me out, cried Ambrose, obviously pleased with this solution.

My story. Banana oil! Anybody's story. Everybody's story. The central theme has been used in pictures fifty times. Say, Deacon, get me straight. They wouldn't accept this hokum from me. I'm too unimportant. I'm nobody. But Griesheimer thinks it's sure fire with your name attached to it, and with Hallam directing and Auburn Six starring it will be a wow. If I'm your confidential man and write the continuity

I'll swim half way to Honolulu in your reflected glory, but they wouldn't let me enter the race under my own name.

You mean to say . . . ?

I mean to say you're a piker if you back out of this. All you have to do is to collect the jack. Leave the rest to me.

I can't do it. Ambrose spoke as firmly as he possibly could do.

Aw, see here now, don't sell me out. Lawrence was becoming impassioned.

There ought to be an alternative. I don't like your scheme at all. You know this is your idea that you have sold, not mine.

It might have been, pleaded Lawrence. It could have been. I tell you a bimbo like Imperia Starling could think it up. It's what they want. Please, say you're back of me.

Well, you accept the money then.

Now, you're talking. You consent?

Under those conditions.

It was Philip Lawrence's turn to become obstinate.

I say, he cried, Jack Story would never hang a pal up like this. How in hell can you take all this business so seriously? Haven't you got a sense of humour? Can't you see it's your *name* that the firm and Philip

Lawrence and everybody else connected with this picture is cashing in on?

My name's not worth a damn in pictures, Ambrose insisted hotly, and you know it. The great picture audience has never even heard of me. Why, that's actually one of the inducements that Griesheimer held out to me when he was trying to persuade me to sign, that it would increase my public.

Say, Deacon — Lawrence was perspiring freely in his effort to explain — where do you think you are? This is Hollywood, HOLLYWOOD, not the Louvre. Of course I know your name isn't worth a damn in pictures. Griesheimer knows it too. Everybody out here knows it. The point is they want to *think* it is. Why else do you suppose you're hauling in the dough? Why, Griesheimer probably never even heard your name pronounced before you came out here. It's francs to pancakes he never saw your play or even knew that it existed. He's been told that you are important and he wants to believe you *are* important. He wants to believe it so badly that he has signed a contract with you that Harold Bell Wright couldn't drag out of him.

Did you ever hear of a commodity called class? Well, that's what these cloak and suit clowns are wistful about. They want to pull class into the

factory. They buy names to put class into the vivace postcards and then they engage hash-throwers and yeggs like me to take it out. There isn't a bird out here — no matter how hard-boiled on the surface — who wouldn't get sentimental and put the carpet down for class. They don't recognize it when they see it — they have to be told about it — but when they once believe in it, they get down on their knees and worship. You represent class to these plumbers and they think your bloody name smeared all over a picture will make it classy. Well, I'm telling you if they feel like that, let 'em. I'm also telling you that your name will be the classiest thing — the only classy thing — about this lovely old bastard opus when it is finished, and I'd make these second-storey guys pay for it.

It seems dishonest, Ambrose responded doubtfully, like taking money under false pretences.

Dishonest! False pretences! You wouldn't look for a roulette wheel in a baseball game, would you?

After a little more argument in this vein, specious though it sounded, Ambrose consented reluctantly to permit Philip Lawrence to go ahead with the continuity of the script known as Spider Boy which related the love of an equestrienne for a ceiling-walker in the circus.

A little later, as Ambrose was leaving, he inquired about the chances of Harry Galen.

Don't bother Griesheimer, was Lawrence's advice. It isn't worth it. He won't take him. He's no good at all for us. What we want out here is real writers, like yourself.

Philip Lawrence already knew so much of his history that Ambrose had found it easy to confide in him regarding his dubious dinner engagement with Imperia Starling, an engagement which Lawrence had advised him to keep.

She won't eat you, he had said. She can't. She won't do anything silly after what she did to you in Santa Fe. You might sue her, you know. Might as well stand in with her. Schwarzstein is pretty important out here. He'll probably make you an offer and then you can get Griesheimer to double it. I'll send one of the studio cars with you and tell the chauffeur to wait for you.

It was this last detail that convinced Ambrose he would be comparatively safe. So, at a quarter after eight on Friday evening, he found himself on the familiar drive leading to Imperia Starling's Beverly Hills bungalow. It was not, however, without trepidation, not without an acceleration of his normal

heart-beat, that Ambrose descended to the terrace from his car. His life in this house had been so fraught with adventure and excitement that he could scarcely hope to accomplish his return to it without experiencing anxiety.

The footman removed his coat as he entered the great hall, brilliantly lighted, but empty. He wondered if he had chosen the wrong evening to make his appearance. Certainly no orchestra was performing, an ominous sign. Seating himself uneasily in a comfortable needle-point arm-chair, he awaited developments. He was not kept waiting long.

Imperia greeted him effusively, but her costume, indicating an informal occasion, confirmed his suspicions. She was dressed in a floating robe of lilac Chinese crêpe, bordered at the throat and the shoulders and the train with the filaments of ostrich feathers of the colour of Chinese vermilion. She carried a huge Spanish paper fan, ultramarine on the one side, orange on the other.

I hope you'll forgive me, Imperia was saying, but I want to talk with *you,* and so I didn't ask anybody else. We shall dine together. It is better so, isn't it?

Ambrose nodded helplessly.

I am, I believe, what you call in trouble, she continued prettily.

At this moment a footman fortuitously appeared with cocktails, thus sparing Ambrose the immediate anguish of determining which window he would prefer to crash through. He swallowed his first cocktail with so much dispatch that the discerning servant immediately refilled his glass. He contrived to dispose of several more before dinner was announced.

While he was drinking, Imperia was talking.

You may wonder, she was saying, why I should bore you with my troubles. Do not deny it . . . he had made no effort to speak, but she had tapped his arm with her closed fan as if he had interrupted her . . . I know. It is always a bore to listen to the troubles of others.

She smiled just here. Her expression was radiant. It seemed ominous to Ambrose that she should choose the occasion on which she looked happiest to discuss her misfortunes.

I do not know whether you know it, Ambrose — do permit me to call you Ambrose — but I have taken a great fancy to you, a *very* great fancy. I talk to few people. I am too proud. Besides, she went on, her eyes glittering like those of an alluring serpent, my troubles to some extent concern you.

The butler announced dinner and his hostess led

him, as though he were on a leash, he felt, to the dining-room. The huge table was adorned with a rich profusion of orchids and silver and glass. Crystal epergnes filled with fruit stood near the centre. Widely separated places were laid for two. The actress apparently viewed the arrangements with disfavour.

Hammond, she commanded, we shall dine in the library.

She led Ambrose to a small chamber which contained, among other furniture, a miniature Louis XV bookcase on the shelves of which reposed a number of recent novels. During the incredibly short interlude in which the servants were engaged in carrying out her orders, Ambrose was grateful for the opportunity to consume three more cocktails. Dinner was now served on a small Empire table. As many of the orchids as the board and two console tables would bear, together with more than enough silver and glass, had been transferred from the dining-room.

Ambrose's attempts at conversation were limited for the most part to monosyllabic replies. Imperia, however, did not seem to be dissatisfied. In spite of her expressed concern, he had never seen her more self-possessed and charming. Little by little, her

manner, added to the effect of the potent cocktails, restored to him some of his lost ease. He was sufficiently conscious of this boon to wish that he had acquired the cocaine habit. Mercifully, Imperia had provided an adequate supply of champagne. With a footman at his elbow constantly replenishing his glass whenever it was empty, Ambrose felt more and more fortified to withstand whatever revelations or recriminations the beautiful woman opposite was holding in store for him. Moreover, considerately or unconsciously, she postponed the moment for more personal speech, dwelling lightly at first on a variety of topics, casual gossip of the studios, references to Mama, dissection of other stars, and the like. However, even in her lightest moments, there was always something portentous about the manner of Imperia Starling. She reminded Ambrose of a friendly summer landscape over which a threatening storm-cloud hovered. It was apparent, moreover, that her pleasanter aspects were born of art rather than nature. It was also obvious that she preferred Imperia Starling to all other possible subjects of conversation. Whatever the ostensible theme of her remarks, she adroitly contrived to drag in references to herself even when there seemed no suitable occasion for her to do so. Her sentences, indeed, were as liberally

sprinkled with personal pronouns as a caviar pot with fish-eggs.

By the time coffee was served at a little table before a couch, on which he now sat by her side, and a footman had removed the soiled plates and silver and taken his departure, Ambrose felt as comfortable as it would ever be possible for him to feel in this feverish environment. This, fortuitously, was the exact moment chosen by Imperia to speak what was on her mind. It was incredible, Ambrose thought afterwards, that she had waited until the servants had left the room. He had reason to be fully aware of how little reticent Imperia could be in the presence of domestics. She was, he was convinced, capable of committing the ultimate folly in their company. To her, apparently, they were no more relevant to caution than a chair or a clock. Then, either accident, or some mysterious cause, had induced the actress to defer her comments.

I am so lonely, so very lonely, was her manner of beginning, while she tapped her fan against her crossed knees, swinging her leg back and forth.

You lonely! he ejaculated, really surprised.

She regarded him with a mild form of irritation, mild at least for Imperia.

Surely you recall, she adjured him, that you drove Jaime out of my house one night?

I drove him out!

Who else? she demanded indifferently, as if the subject no longer interested her.

I drove him out! he repeated with growing indignation.

It seemed advisable to help himself liberally to the cognac which accompanied the coffee. This act was facilitated by the fact that Imperia served cognac in large crystal goblets which made it convenient for Ambrose to pour out ten drinks at once.

You drove him out, she repeated implacably. I shall never forget that horrible night, although I have forgiven it. . . . The magenta lines which formed her lips twisted into a taut smile. . . . After all, she went on, lighting a cigarette, after all, that is not why I am lonely. Jaime, naturally, returned the next week. What could I do but take him back? His jealousy was entirely natural. He adores me. I could not blame him. In his place, perhaps, I would have behaved even worse, isn't it?

Ambrose thought it highly possible that she would do, but he refrained from saying as much.

After all, Ambrose, you must know that is not why I am lonely. . . . How soft and musical her voice

had become! . . . I am lonely because all great people must be lonely. We cannot contact the people who understand us.

Ambrose, in Europe — all over that vast continent — I was known as a great star, a famous star. I come here and they make a mock of me. They put me in silly pictures. They ask me to work with incompetent directors. They understand nothing of what a woman like me must feel. All that I am willing to overlook. Do you know why?

No, Ambrose, wide-eyed, replied while he helped himself freely to cognac.

Because they pay me ten thousand dollars a week, that is why. So I say to myself, swine, I will make your stupid pictures, I will obey your stupid directors . . . well, sometimes . . . and I will save myself money and build myself a house where I can live for my art and be happy.

But you have a house! Ambrose exclaimed.

This! She frowned. A pigsty! A sheep-barn! A woodshed! I said I shall build myself a house. But do you know what has happened? she demanded.

No, Ambrose replied.

This Schwarzstein, this filthy, scurvy rat, has called me to his office to ask me to accept a cut. We must have a retrenches, he says to me. A retrenches!

. . . She lifted her arms and a myriad of bracelets jangled against her elbows.

What a retrenches might be, Ambrose hadn't the slightest notion. He silently awaited enlightenment.

I ask him what he means and he tells me that my contract runs out in three months. Then he will ask me to take a cut, to renew for five thousand. Worse! He ask me to do this now! Never! I cry. And now he cannot, but in three months, yes. So I go to L.L.B. That is where you come in.

I come in!

Yes, you. At the moment you have great power at L.L.B. You can ask what you please and you get it, isn't it? And who was it who discovered your talent for pictures? Who brought you to Hollywood?

Ambrose knew the answers to these questions. You did, he admitted.

Well, for me then, you must do this. You must say, My next picture is for Imperia Starling. You must tell them to engage me. They will be delighted, because they want me for a long time, isn't it, but they do not dream I will go to them.

But I may not do another picture!

You will do another picture. Who brought you here? Who recognized your great talent for writing scenarios? Imperia Starling. Who made Jaime leave

home? Ambrose Deacon. You see you owe me something.

I will tell them, Ambrose groaned, and I am sure they will be delighted.

Ambrose, I know your great heart! I know how good you are. I know you will do what I ask. It is difficult for me to go to them, but when you tell them I want to come they will fly to me. I do not know what it is, this feeling I have for you. It is nothing I have felt before. It is a new sensation. I cannot therefore explain it. But I must be frank. I am always frank. It is my nature to say what is in my heart, isn't it? Therefore I say that Jaime has reason to be jealous of you.

Where is the Count? Ambrose demanded in some alarm.

She smiled. Poor Jaime, she murmured, shaking her head back and forth, poor Jaime, I sent him away tonight to do me a favour. There is nothing . . . nothing . . . she was speaking with more determination . . . that he would not do for me. Perhaps, she explained sweetly, that is the reason I am more interested in some one who seems to regard my charms with indifference.

At any rate, she continued, after a pause during which a comparatively frozen Ambrose made no

effort to speak, I question whether I want him to come back.

This time Ambrose drank his cognac straight from the bottle.

How's Mrs. Starling? he inquired.

Mrs. Starling! Mama? I bare my soul to you, rip open its last secret chamber, and you ask me how is my Mama! Ambrose, have you no pity?

Afterwards Ambrose recalled that Imperia had never before appeared so beautiful to him. Her eyes were moist with tears. Her round bosoms rose and fell rhythmically. He was ultimately convinced that her artificial moments were her most splendid, but where did artifice begin and nature end? Cognac, cocktails, champagne, and emotion rendered him incapable of analysis.

Miss Starling . . . he began.

Imperia, please, she prompted him.

Imperia, he continued, I'll be your friend at L.L.B. I'll be your friend.

Ah, I knew I could rely on your great heart.

The tears gushed down Imperia's cheeks as she flung herself at Ambrose's feet in a pretty gesture of gratitude. He recalled that some one had informed him that she was never obliged to rely on glycerine when a script demanded tears.

And remember — ten thousand is but a pittance. I must have at least fifteen thousand. They will realize that. You are to insist that I play in your next picture. *Insist,* do you understand?

Helping her to rise, Ambrose kissed Imperia's hand — it was the first time he had ever done such a thing — and bade her farewell. Following him out of the library through the great hall to the terrace, she waved her handkerchief after him as he drove away.

Sixteen

Look out for that nigger!

Heeding the call of an electrician, Ambrose anxiously awaited the onslaught of a bellicose Ethiopian. Suddenly, struck squarely and severely on the top of his head, he was borne to the floor where he lay prone and trembling under a black cloth stretched on a light wooden frame.

He extricated himself to hear Auburn Six explain: One of the reflectors swung loose. We call them niggers on the lot.

This incident introduced Ambrose to the stage where Martell Hallam was directing Spider Boy.

His next surprise was of a more agreeable nature. Hallam invited him to sit down in a chair across the back of which his name, Ambrose Deacon, was printed in bold white letters.

His third surprise was equivocal. The set in front of him — a superb affair — seemed to represent the ball-room in the palace of a rich Russian nobleman. Auburn Six, in an evening gown of surpassing splendour, a tiara of emeralds around her brow, was wrapped in a sable cloak. Cossacks in shakos and

cartridge belts, and innumerable civilian guests, male and female, in elaborately correct evening attire, wandered about.

Ambrose whisperingly questioned Philip Lawrence: How did your circus girl get into this set?

Philip whispered back: Oh, didn't I tell you? We dropped the circus. Hallam objected that circuses had been overdone. This is your *third* and best idea.

Ambrose was really growing up. What *is* my third idea? he inquired blandly.

As Philip paused to light a cigarette before replying, a voice cried: Hey there, you angels, switch those ashcans to the right.

Spider Boy is now a Russian spy employed by the Tsar, Lawrence explained. Really, Auburn in boy's clothes.

But . . .

Oh, she's a girl all right. In this scene she works without whiskers. I had to put her in trousers occasionally to justify the title. That's a wow of a title you thought up, by the way. That alone would sell the picture.

Switch those broads and get that baby off the prop wagon over on this lens louse.

Aside from the electricians who seemed to be obeying orders addressed to them in early Czecho-

slovakian, no one appeared to be doing anything. The extra people wandered about the huge stage, in and out of the set, talking and smoking.

When do they start work? Ambrose demanded.

Well, they've been trying to shoot this scene for four days now. Everybody's been made up and dressed for it for about ninety hours, roughly speaking. Something always goes wrong. . . . Philip interrupted himself long enough to extend a roguish hand towards the back of an extra boy who presently sailed in the air emitting a prodigious scream. . . . Grinning, Philip continued, I've forgotten what's wrong today, if anybody knows.

Nothing's wrong today, declared Martell Hallam who had approached from behind. Swell set, eh, Mr. Deacon? Carries out your idea, don't it?

I hadn't dreamed of anything so magnificent, Ambrose replied.

This is an exact copy of one of the rooms in the Romanoff palace at Petrograd before the Revolution. It was a hell of a lot of trouble to get it right, but it's worth it. That malachite table, that Sèvres vase, everything's real.

Does it make any difference? Ambrose asked innocently.

Difference! Hell yes! Every God damn thing has

to be real in any set I work in. How can an actor feel anything if he's playing with fake stuff? Why, I make the girls wear French underclothing even if they don't have to undress in the picture. I even pick out perfumes.

Perfumes? Do they photograph?

You'd be surprised, Deacon, but they do. Certain perfumes act as aphrodisiacs. Others repell. If I spray a room with Pois de senteur de chez moi you ought to see how the actors begin to behave. What's your idea, he went on without pausing, for the scene in the mountains, the scene in the peasant's hut?

Just what do you mean? Ambrose queried. Then, Isn't it clear in the script?

Oh, I don't pay any attention to a script. I look at it a couple of times, then I throw it away. By the time I get through I'll make something of your idea. No offence intended. You see, you fellows who write for the stage don't quite get the hang of pictures at first. Now there are a hell of a lot of details in this script that are all wrong for picture technique. Oh, I know you been over it, Phil, but you left plenty of bilge in here out of courtesy to Ambrose Deacon, the great playwright. I always have the same trouble when I engage outsiders. Probably on the whole it's a good thing. You playwrights buck us up, put us on

our mettle. When I get through with this script it'll be O.K., but of course I have to work harder on it than I would if one of the boys around here had hatched it. I went over the whole affair with Phil first, but it's while we're grinding film that I make the most changes. And say, wait till I get to the cutting-room. Now, about that scene in the mountains, I wanted to know if you had any ideas about the set.

I'm sure whatever you suggest will be all right, Ambrose assured him.

Now you're speaking! I guess this picture'll be a hit. I wish more playwrights were like you. I wouldn't have any trouble then. The art director of this firm ought to be laying sewers in the streets, but when I tell him what I want things come out all right.

As Martell Hallam strolled away, Philip Lawrence muttered to Ambrose: The moronic bastard! How he gets away with it, I don't know. His pictures are all wows. He's got the brains of a night-watchman, but he never has a flop. He used to be a stage-hand and did his stuff in the cauliflower industry on the side. He's got a powerful left and isn't above pushing in the face of an evil ham now and then.

Auburn Six who, aided by her maid, had been

adding powder to her make-up and arranging her hair before a dressing-table with a mirror backed up against the set, now approached Ambrose.

Well, how do you think you like pictures? she inquired.

It's all so new to me, he replied. I'm not used to it yet. When do they take pictures?

On first Thursdays and the twenty-ninth of February. You'll never get used to it. No one ever does. I've been made up and worked up emotionally now for four days. By the time they photograph this scene I'll be old enough to play a witch in Macbeth.

The set was now filling rapidly with extra people and the leading actors had been summoned from their dressing-rooms. Philip pointed out an old gentleman in evening-dress with a broad red satin ribbon across his white shirt-front.

That's Karl Wenig, the famous German actor who used to work for UFA. L.L.B. got tired of reading his notices, comparing him to disadvantage with the American hams. So they engaged him at a tremendous salary and now they're trying to kill him with the fans.

How can they do that?

Easy. He's playing the villain of this piece. Of course he'll be magnificent. On the stage he'd run

away with the show, but the fans don't like actors who play unsympathetic rôles.

Why do they want to kill him? Why don't they build up his reputation?

He's too expensive for the magnates. They'll wait till the fans walk out on him and then renew his contract cheap. It isn't for nothing that Griesheimer used to run a cloak and suit business. Why, I believe he'd pull a fire if it wouldn't take so long to build the place up again.

Is that what Invincible is doing with Imperia Starling? Ambrose found an appropriate opportunity to inquire.

Imperia's expensive at any price. Nobody else out here would have her. She's through.

You don't think Griesheimer . . . ?

Lawrence laughed. Say, he'd take her on as an extra girl. Invincible's stung good and hard. Oh boy, wait till *her* contract runs out. She'll be lucky to get twenty-five cents a week.

Music!

The vast crowd of well-dressed extras began to spin about the set to the languorous measures of Love's Dream After the Ball. In and out among them threaded Auburn Six in the arms of the Russian General. It was not long before Hallam lifted

his hand: the music stopped and everybody in the set stood still.

Auburn, I didn't see that, he cried. Wait till you're closer to the camera. Get clear of the crowd. Make it clean cut. If the audience misses that scene they won't understand the next. Try it again. Music!

The dancers again went through with the scene and this time Ambrose saw Auburn extract a paper from the Russian General's coat, while she danced with him. The Russian General seemed to be unaware of the theft.

Stop! cried Hallam. Say, you in the yellow dress! You watched Miss Six do that! Look at your partners. Listen to the music. Don't anybody look at Miss Six.

The scene was rehearsed again, apparently successfully, for lights were presently added, powerful, glaring lights, and the cameras, set at several different angles, began to grind. The scene was taken five separate times, and then close-ups were made of Auburn robbing the General's pocket.

That's all for today, Hallam announced. Turning to Ambrose, he remarked, Well, I got it, didn't I?

Perfectly, Ambrose assured him. The playwright clipped and lighted one of Griesheimer's Meridiana Kohinoors.

I suppose a lot of scenes take place in this set, he remarked to Philip Lawrence as they walked away.

No, that's the only one. Oh, I guess there's another with Auburn alone, if Hallam decides to leave it in.

But isn't it awfully expensive to build a big set like this for so little use?

Expensive! I should think it is expensive. Everything Hallam does is expensive. If you handed him a script calling for a single set in a London dive he'd make it expensive. Why, you ought to see the ice palace they're constructing down in a corner of the lot for Spider Boy. Hallam's injected a ski contest into the picture which means dragging the whole company hundreds of miles to a mountain where there's plenty of snow and keeping 'em there till they learn how to use skis. He'll throw in a caravan with camels and the burning down of the Paris Opéra if he can think of a way to do it. This picture will cost two millions before he gets through with it.

Two millions!

At least. He'll take about sixty-four reels of which at the outside they'll use only twelve. If it doesn't turn out to be a super-special they'll only use six. The rest of this grand opus will lie scattered on the cutting-room floor.

But why?

It's part of the game. Griesheimer wouldn't have any respect for Hallam if he didn't waste money. He *has* to waste more jack than any other director to maintain his position. In each succeeding picture he has to waste more than he did on the one before. It's part of the bunk.

But doesn't Griesheimer know it's bunk?

Of course he knows. He groans and moans and swings his arms about and curses and yells that Hallam's got to cut down expenses, and Hallam gets more profane still and swears he'll leave the lousy joint and go to work for Invincible, but both of 'em know they're only acting a scene and Hallam knows if he spent a penny less that Griesheimer would think he was no good. So they compromise by paying some extra girl nine instead of ten dollars a day and then Hallam orders a flock of solid-gold gondolas or imports Zuloaga to paint a drawing-room set for a script that revolves about the life of a New England farmer.

As time went on Ambrose had further opportunity to study this habit of Hallam's, not altogether, he learned, idiosyncratic with this director. The playwright, after his first day on the lot, secured from Lawrence a copy of the script, which he read, but

Hallam's departures from this script were so frequent and radical that Ambrose was constantly being surprised. The ski contest was abandoned because the tentative date set for the release of the film apparently would not leave Hallam time enough to carry it through. He substituted for this a drowning in a lake and from a map picked a lake in the distant Rockies as the only appropriate location. There were plenty of other lakes nearer to hand, but Hallam insisted that no other would do. The scene was elaborate as it involved a Russian picnic. Some seventy-odd persons, as well as camera men, star, and leading actors, were carried by rail a few hundred miles only to discover that there had been no water in this particular lake for several years. Hallam was not nonplussed. He brought his company back to Los Angeles and filmed the scene within walking distance of the studio. The episode never reached the screen: it died on the cutting-room floor.

It had been Ambrose's intention to leave Hollywood while the picture was being filmed — he could find no logical reason for remaining — but Philip Lawrence set him right.

You've got to hang around so they can consult you, he explained. Of course they won't take your advice, but they're paying you and so they'll go

through the form of asking your opinion from time to time. It's done, and that's that!

So Ambrose remained in his bungalow at the Ambassador and, almost imperceptibly to him, became involved to an amazing extent in the social life of the community. There were bathing parties — everybody had a pool of warm blue water on his own estate: even at the beach no one ever thought of bathing in the ocean — ping-pong parties, tennis parties, bridge parties, dances and dinners. Wilhelmina and Philip Lawrence dragged him about to these and after a brief period of futile objection he had submitted to being dragged without making further protest. In a way, after he had become accustomed to meeting the same people day after day — for the same group would go almost in a body from one house to another — he didn't mind so much. With Ambrose habit was all-important.

Wilhelmina had not secured a part in Spider Boy — in the new Russian version there was no suitable rôle — but L.L.B. had signed her up for a year and presently she was to do another picture with Dick Ruby, this time in the capacity of leading woman. It seemed reasonable to suppose that she would be a star before long.

Ambrose was assuredly growing accustomed to

Wilhelmina. She had seen to that. At first she had attacked him by telephone with requests that he escort her hither and thither. It was not long before he felt sufficiently comfortable with her to assume the initiative. Never, however, was he quite easy under her banter. It would be more exact to say that he was never quite certain when she was serious and when she was spoofing. One day she would assure him that the films were all her life and ambition. Another, that they were but a stepping-stone to a career of quite another kind. It was not seldom, either, that she referred to the possibility of becoming his wife. He found this joke embarrassing. Nevertheless constant association with this lovely girl had brought to him the realization that he would miss her if she went out of his life.

One day they motored to Santa Barbara and lunched at El Mirasol.

At table Wilhelmina demanded: Ambrose, aren't you ever going to take me seriously?

But, Billie, you know my trouble is I always take you too seriously.

I mean when I propose to you.

You never have.

I'm always proposing to you. You're the only man I've ever considered marrying.

You're kidding me.

Wilhelmina lighted a cigarette. Perhaps, she said. What do you think?

I think you're kidding me.

It was late in the evening before they returned home, Wilhelmina driving. Bidding her good-night at the foot of the stairs leading to her apartment, he entered his own room. As he turned on the lights he learned that he faced a determined man holding a levelled revolver. Even in the advanced state of terror which his unwelcome visitor had precipitated, he recognized Abel Morris.

Seventeen

You cur! You contemptible cur! Abel Morris was speaking.

Ambrose immediately surrendered all ambition to live. It was apparently the culmination of his trial by fire on the Pacific Coast that Abel Morris should go mad in his presence and attempt to shoot him.

Well, snarled his persecutor, still levelling the fatal weapon, why don't you say something?

Ambrose, too, wondered why he could say nothing.

I'm going to shoot you dead, the millionaire manufacturer continued to shout, unless you promise to marry my daughter.

Ambrose sank to his knees, unable to understand why no one seemed to hear Morris's bellowing. Speech of the right sort, he was aware, might soothe the madman, but Ambrose's vocal chords were paralyzed and no succour seemed imminent. Submission to the bullet was apparently foreordained.

I'll give you five minutes to make up your mind, the maniac went on, his voice trembling with emotion. Removing his watch from his waistcoat pocket, he placed it on a table where he could easily refer to it.

Ambrose was growing steadily calmer. After all, what had he to live for? Wilhelmina, perhaps . . . but what else? His future looked black. Nothing to look forward to but fame and success, and every day he was learning more about how much one has to pay for fame and success. Why had he ever written that play? An involuntary groan of vain regret escaped from his lips.

Little did I think when I met you you were such a desperate character! Morris yelled. You groan because you're afraid I'll shoot you, but not one word do you let out about your intentions towards my daughter.

Ambrose suffered an almost uncontrollable impulse to laugh hysterically. Certainly he had read these lines somewhere. Laughter, too, would indubitably tend to shorten his period of torture. The muscles around the corners of his lips twitched nervously.

Writhe away! cried Abel Morris, evidently mistaking Ambrose's expression for one of agony. You have three minutes more to speak before I put you where you can't writhe any more. Where is she? he demanded.

Quite suddenly Ambrose found that he could speak. I don't know, he said. Indeed, I don't know.

I don't know where she is, or who she is, or what you are talking about. You're making a tremendous mistake, Mr. Morris. You are shooting an innocent man.

Ambrose, who thought he had conquered fear, was surprised to discover that his teeth were chattering. What he had said, moreover, did not appear to have made any effect on Abel Morris, as that one's jaw hardened perceptibly and shot out at a dangerous angle. Just here, however, Ambrose, his back to the outside screen-door, heard a familiar voice.

Why, Papa, Wilhelmina demanded, what are you doing with that revolver?

Entering the room, she walked straight over to Morris and removed the gun from his limp fingers. Unarmed, the poor fellow sank into an arm-chair and began to sob.

Ambrose, she adjured the playwright, get up at once out of that perfectly ridiculous attitude.

Suddenly relieved of the pressure of prospective gun-fire, Ambrose was only too happy to obey her. Rising from his knees, he sat down heavily on the bed, clinging with a kind of desperate intensity to one of the footposts.

I was only trying to save you, Georgiana, Abel Morris was explaining, save you from this fiend.

How could you do it, no matter how much he persuaded you? How could you?

How could I what, Papa? Have you lost your mind? What *are* you talking about? Clearly Georgiana was impatient.

I'll make him marry you anyhow! With this declaration Abel Morris sprang to his feet with clenched fists and a new determination published in his eyes. Threatened anew, Ambrose rolled back on the bed, his hands and feet pushing helplessly upward like the paws of a terrified puppy.

Papa . . . Wilhelmina-Georgiana's voice rang out loud and clear . . . stop this nonsense at once. Why should *you* try to make Ambrose marry me? I think that's a matter for Ambrose and me to decide.

The manufacturer stared in bewilderment at his daughter.

Didn't he abduct you from your home and try to seduce you? he demanded.

Georgiana howled with laughter. Papa, you too! she cried. You've been going to the movies! . . . She turned to Ambrose. . . . I wish to God you had abducted me and seduced me, she assured him. It would have been too thrilling. That would have been worth waiting for.

Ambrose was sitting up once more, but it cannot be said that he felt very comfortable.

Now, Papa . . . she again addressed her angry and perplexed parent . . . get this straight. If there's been any seducing going on it's been on my part. I left home to go into the movies and I met Ambrose on the train coming out here. I told him immediately that I might marry him and I've been telling him so ever since. Sometimes I think I mean it. Would you, Ambrose, she demanded, if I asked you tonight?

Oh, yes! he responded fervently.

Then . . . Abel Morris began.

Then, Papa, you're an ass, and so I think is Ambrose. I don't understand myself at all. The man's not handsome or amusing or charming. His kiss is like a Sunday at sea or faded roses. Maybe I'm fond of him. Maybe I've got a front-page complex. I don't know why I should want to marry him except he's so successful and he doesn't want me.

I do! I do! cried Ambrose, and he suddenly realized that he actually did. He saw her at last as a haven. His life as a famous man in the future would be sure to be full of extravagant complications and this extraordinarily efficient girl of seventeen would

be of great assistance to him in solving them. Besides, indubitably she was extremely pretty.

Mr. Deacon, will you ever forgive me? Abel Morris inquired penitently, extending his hand.

Ambrose clasped the proffered hand and replied, It was a natural mistake. Then he passed the box of Meridiana Kohinoors.

Abel Morris stared at the box in amazement.

My God, he exclaimed, where did you get these? Do you know how much they cost?

Inexplicably, Georgiana chose this moment to burst into tears.

I hate you both! she avowed, as she rushed from the room.

For the next few days Ambrose existed practically in a state of trance. Naturally there were innumerable things to do, but they all seemed to get done somehow without his making an effort. He scarcely saw Georgiana at all. She was too fully occupied in arranging her trousseau for a wedding which had been set exactly one week ahead from the night when Abel Morris had pointed a revolver at Ambrose's heart. His prospective father-in-law spent a good deal of time with him, so apologetic about his awkward behaviour that he seemed somewhat silly,

extremely curious ostensibly to learn the details of how moving pictures were made, but inclined on the lot to pay more attention to trim ankles than to the methods of the various directors. Mrs. Morris, it became known almost immediately, would be unable to attend the wedding as the present state of her health was too uncertain to permit of her travelling. Abel Morris did not seem to regret his wife's absence.

After Morris had been introduced to Griesheimer and Philip Lawrence, his respect for Ambrose's ability increased enormously.

A man who can do what you have done with these hard-boiled fellows out here can do anything, he confided to the playwright. You would be a treasure for any concern. I got no doubts about you.

When he was alone, which was seldom, Ambrose considered the situation in almost complete bewilderment. So much had happened in the brief period since his exodus from New York. To all intents and purposes he had become a different individual. That is to say that his feelings, his emotions, his thoughts, and his desires were essentially what they had always been, but everything else had changed. His external gestures, his manner of living, his conversation, all were confusedly in contradiction with his convictions.

He had, he reflected sadly, actually learned to smoke cigars.

When he left New York, it had been with the feeling that perhaps his writing days were over and he had discovered that seemingly, so far as profit was concerned, they had only just begun. The subject of matrimony had never before sufficiently interested him for him to give it a serious thought and yet he now found himself engaged to be married imminently and actually not dreading it, for Wilhelmina-Georgiana had somehow not only persuaded him of her glamour, she had also made him dependent upon her to an extraordinary degree, dependent upon her decisions, upon her tastes, and more than anything else on her protection. Pleasant as it would be to bask in the charming society of the beautiful Kansas City girl, Ambrose realized that he was inclined to rely on her as a shield, and to think of her in terms of that symbol.

She had become for him so protective a figure, indeed, that social contacts no longer alarmed him. To be exact, they were no longer actually contacts. He scarcely permitted these creatures to touch him. He walked among them, smiling, indeed, as if he were in a dream, conversing, laughing, making all the gestures they demanded without essential com-

promise on his part. There were even times, so accustomed had he become to hearing it spoken of as his, that he actually believed that he had written the script of a film called Spider Boy. Certainly every one else seemed to believe that he had. In an environment where the second personal pronoun was seldom or never heard, perversely it was applied aplenty here. And Ambrose was aware that if the picture turned out to be a failure it would be applied aplenty more.

As has been intimated, none of the onerous obligations of preparation for the holy rites were left for Ambrose to fulfil. The fact was that when Griesheimer had heard of the engagement, which he did the morning after it was contracted, he insisted that the ceremony be celebrated on his ranch in the desert, while he was to be permitted to arrange all the details. There was no arguing with him, or what there was was feeble, consisting for the most part of protestations from Abel Morris who exhibited great fistfuls of bills of fabulous amounts, crying that the father of the bride should have the privilege of paying her wedding expenses. All his arguments, however, were waved away impatiently by the determined Griesheimer, who informed the heads of the various departments on his lot that he wanted a swell

wedding in a certain place on a certain day, and then forgot all about it.

On the morning of the great day, all the studios were closed in honour of the event because everybody in the moving picture world had been invited. It was a pretty sight to see them driving forth in great caravans of high-priced cars. Once on the desert the train of moving vehicles extended forward as far as the eye could reach. Leaving the waste of sand, the party entered a gate in a high wall and immediately was transported into a rich garden. With groves of orange trees on either hand, stately, formal rows of cypresses guarded an avenue that led straight up to an imperial Italian villa, approached by a wide terrace set with huge marble jars of blue hydrangeas and classic statues. This terrace soon resembled a painting by Veronese come to life, peopled as it was with the marionettes of moviedom in brilliant, rich renaissance costumes.

As Griesheimer so fittingly put it: I think Roy did it pretty good, but these tights ain't so comfortable.

Ambrose and Georgiana, somewhat overcome by the splendour of the prepared fête, strayed off into an enormous chamber on the second floor where the presents had been laid out. Imperia had sent a tea-service of solid gold; Auburn Six, a clock of jade;

Abel Morris, a cheque for one hundred thousand dollars; Martell Hallam, an embossed silver refrigerator. Two large console tables were completely devoted to Dunhill lighters of malachite, platinum, gold, onyx, alligator-skin, ostrich-skin, enamel, and ebony. There were more costly presents from Capa Nolin, Harold Edwards, Herbert Ringrose, Dick Ruby, Zoë Claire, Stella Which, Lucile Logan, Denis Harvey, Scandia Cortland, and dozens of others.

Standing by the window, Ambrose was aware of a cloud of dust far out on the plain. In its swirl a troop of horsemen was rapidly approaching. As they came nearer he heard the joyous cries of an Indian tribe and he recognized the leader of this wild band as Marna Frost. It was at the moment that the aborigines solemnly rode up the drive that the property man at L.L.B. had the inspiration of sending up a flight of flamingos.

Ambrose was blind and deaf, and all but dumb, during the celebration of the wedding ceremony, but he recovered somewhat as the richly clad guests, many of whom he recognized as moving picture extras, requisitioned no doubt to make a richer background, filed by to congratulate him and his bride, and remarked to his astonishment that he stood in a chamber completely smothered in flowers and green

leaves. Indeed, the entire ceiling was hidden under orchids.

Georgiana at length led him forth, through the private bar, which had been set up in a room at least one hundred feet long, behind which uniformed attendants were opening bottles of champagne so rapidly that the popping of corks created a din above which any conversation was difficult.

The great event of the day was the wedding supper served at four o'clock on the terrace. The principal table and the costumes of the guests who sat there, had been arranged to represent Veronese's painting, The Marriage at Cana, although there was certainly no present necessity for converting the water into wine. The board was heaped high with flowers and fruit in silver and gold vessels. The elaborately embroidered cloth was shining with silver and glass. Cigarette cases of platinum and cobra-skin and fans with turquoise sticks were the favours beside each guest's plate. Back and forth on the terrace below this table servitors in purple and cerise doublet and hose led leopards and panthers attached to silver chains. A band played minuets and pavanes alternately with fox-trots and tangos. There were daylight fireworks and a parade of white peacocks and baboons on the lawn.

Sometime during these kaleidoscopic proceedings Ambrose had wit enough to note, among the myriads of long tables set out on the sward, that a special table seemed to be devoted to the mamas. At the exact moment that he made this astounding discovery, he caught the roving eye of Mama Starling and that eye appeared to be winking at him. Had he, he wondered, been drinking too much champagne?

Just before Ambrose left the supper-table — to depart with Georgiana on the prescribed honeymoon — Griesheimer leaned across his bride to say, By the way, Ambrose, your picture's great, one of the best we done, but we thought of one change we should make if you don't care.

Ambrose avowed truthfully that he didn't care. A little later, as he waited in an ante-room for Georgiana to change her dress, Philip Lawrence found an opportunity to speak to him.

Did Griesheimer explain to you about the title? Lawrence demanded. As Ambrose looked blank, he went on: You see, it's like this. It's a question of malignant insects: you know, cockroaches, bedbugs . . . spiders. Well, certain people in Grand Rapids and Des Moines and Galesburg just wouldn't stand for a title like that. You know housewives hate spiders and housewives are our best customers in

the tank towns. So we decided — I'm sure you won't mind — to use your other lovely old title.

I don't seem to quite remember what that was, Ambrose remarked suavely.

Love and Danger. Good-bye, you lucky fellow! You won't be here for the preview, but I'll see you at the opening.

Eighteen

The honeymoon began in one of the large hotels at Santa Barbara and Ambrose speedily discovered that he knew nothing whatever about servants. The wholesale manner in which Georgiana ordered them about, got what she wanted, and a lot more than she had asked for, fascinated him, but he was not up to emulating her example. He just couldn't do it. He remembered that when he was a boy visiting his aunt on the Chicago West Side he had been accustomed to carry a heavy suit-case, usually full of books, from the station to the street-car. Were there no porters in those days? Surely he might have afforded the extra dime. Once, only once, in his old village, he had escorted a girl to a dance — he was about seventeen at the time — without engaging a carriage. The night was bitter cold and the girl had frozen her ears. Somebody should have told him, instructed him, as Georgiana was now instructing him.

If Georgiana ordered the servants about a good deal, it is probable that she ordered Ambrose about still more, but he discovered, to his stupefaction, that he liked to be ordered about. It gave him immense

confidence to have Georgiana behind him telling him what to do. In the future, with this adequate background to rely on, he could even imagine himself taking the offensive under certain conditions. Assuredly his defensive would never be so weak again.

A vague picture arose in his mind of the desirability of a lazy existence with Georgiana in some tropical clime, but he had not yet made this ideal concrete. It was, to be sure, essentially the life they were leading at present. Georgiana was free until Dick Ruby commenced work on his next picture, and free even after that if she carried out her threat to break her contract, an easy matter as she was under age when she signed it. They had not, however, discussed the future. What with the money Ambrose was making from his play — now being performed by two companies — and the money he would get for his picture, to say nothing of the ample cheque presented to him by his father-in-law, he foresaw no occasion to worry about his financial condition. Any whim that Georgiana cared to indulge might easily be gratified.

So, first in the great hotel in Santa Barbara and later in a smaller hotel in another town on the coast of Southern California, the idyl prolonged itself, the

two playing tennis and bathing, talking, walking, eating, sleeping, and loving. This was their daily routine into which no false note from the outer world broke. At last, however, this pleasant holiday came to an end, because Georgiana decided they must return to attend the opening of Love and Danger at Girstein's Byzantine Theatre in Hollywood.

They came back on the day announced for the opening to a suite which had been reserved for them in a bungalow at the Ambassador. Almost immediately Ambrose realized that he was truly a celebrated figure. The telephone bell rang incessantly. Telegrams and flowers arrived in profusion. Abel Morris had returned from Kansas City to be present on this important occasion. Jack Story had been permitted by his physician to undertake the trip from Santa Fe. Even Harold Edwards, the producer of The Stafford Will Case, had arrived from New York.

In the evening, in her bungalow sitting-room, Auburn Six entertained Ambrose and Georgiana, Abel Morris and Jack Story. Auburn's mother made the sixth. Ambrose drank so much champagne at this agreeable dinner-party that he believed he had fortified himself against the probable hissing of the picture, which he had not seen since it was cut,

assembled, and titled. Abel Morris devoted so much attention to Mrs. Six that Georgiana whispered to Ambrose that she was sure that her papa was a little gone on the lady. Jack Story evidently found it very easy to converse with Auburn Six. Toasts were drunk to the bride and groom, to the future picture star, and to the world's greatest dramatist and screen writer. Altogether it was a convivial and delightful occasion.

At eight o'clock Auburn announced that it was time to start for the theatre.

They will wait for us, of course, she explained, but it will be very difficult to get there at all. It will take at least an hour.

Abel Morris contrived to inveigle Mrs. Six into a taxi while the others left the Ambassador in Auburn's Marmon. A holiday air hovered over the perron of the Ambassador, an air to which the voluble and flattering Hughie gave audition. The Cocoanut grove was emptying groups of fragile and expensively dressed ladies into the long line of cars that waited to bear a succession of the celebrated names of Hollywood to the theatre. Wilshire Boulevard, in front of the hotel, was already an entanglement of automobiles, striving to fall into the line.

After they had driven about a mile, Ambrose dis-

covered that they were moving forward at a snail's pace in one of two unbroken lines of cars. Fortunately a policeman at a crossing recognized Auburn and sent her Marmon ahead of the line. In this dishonest manner they gained about half a mile. The kerb was edged with spectators. Auburn was marked at once and whenever the car passed beneath a street-lamp, the crowd shrieked its cheers. It seemed to Ambrose as though Tiberius could never have made as triumphant an entry into Rome as Auburn Six, on this occasion, made into Hollywood.

It's marvellous, Georgiana cried, really marvellous! I think I want to be a moving picture star after all.

Wait, Auburn adjured her. This is nothing.

She was right. As the car made further progress, the way was frequently blocked by traffic regulations. Now the crowd surged forward, breaking through the police ranks. Faces were pressed against the car windows. Voices cried: Auburn Six! Our Love! Wonderful Auburn Six! Hurray!

It's *your* evening! Georgiana admitted in involuntary admiration.

Ambrose will have his turn, Auburn promised.

Squirming a little at this, Ambrose wished he had drunk a little more champagne.

The scene at the entrance of the theatre did not seem real to Ambrose. The street, the roofs of buildings, the neighbouring windows, the lobby, all were crowded to their uttermost capacity. Search-lights swept the faces. A cleared passage from street to lobby, across the sidewalk, was sternly held in order by uniformed officers. As they drove up, Ambrose heard a man in evening-dress announce through a megaphone: Miss Imperia Starling. Amidst rapturous applause the celebrated lady advanced to a chalked spot on the pavement and adjusted her Spanish shawl while a camera man ground out her famous smile. Mama Starling and Count Jaime Supari waited on the side-lines.

When Auburn emerged from the Marmon her welcome was deafening: the man with the megaphone could not be heard as he unnecessarily announced her name.

Auburn! Our Auburn! the crowd greeted her. An old man, a girl, and a young boy contrived to slip through the line.

Let me kiss the hem of your garment, begged the girl.

Let me kiss your foot! was the old man's desire.

Auburn lifted the boy in her arms and imprinted a kiss on his lips.

Then great cheers welled forth from the crowd. Never before had Ambrose heard such a din, at least not made by human throats. He and his companions stood at one side while Auburn was being photographed.

Suddenly Ambrose became aware that the man with the megaphone was announcing the new bride and groom, Mr. Ambrose Deacon, the author of Love and Danger, and Miss Wilhelmina Ford. With a smiling Georgiana clinging to his arm, he managed to totter up to the chalk-line. Pale as death, terrified half out of his senses, he submitted to the cranking of the camera.

The interior of the theatre was overrun with people. Imperia warmly grasped Ambrose's hand to congratulate him on the success of a picture which had not yet been shown. Griesheimer and Martell Hallam patted him on the back. Wrinkled old Mrs. Girstein, mother of the owner of the theatre, tottered forward in purple plush to say, We waited for you, Auburn, and you, Mr. Deacon. We couldn't begin till you got here.

It was close to nine-thirty as they marched down the aisle to their seats while the entire audience rose to its feet and cheered. At this moment Ambrose regretted that Abel Morris had not shot him.

It will soon be over, he assured himself, settling back in his seat while Georgiana clasped his hand. He was to find that he was mistaken. To be sure, the house was immediately plunged in darkness so that Ambrose caught only a fleeting glimpse of this cinema temple which combined the best elements of Theodoric's Tomb at Ravenna with those of St. Mark's at Venice and the Paramount Theatre in New York. Nevertheless considerable time elapsed before the picture was exposed.

First, the orchestra played a long overture. Next Girstein's well-advertised prologue to the film was unfolded. Girstein, Auburn explained, prided himself on his prologues. They were what he had to give to the picture world. There were marches of girls dressed as dolphins. There were ballets of girls dressed as birds and butterflies. There were choruses of girls apparently not dressed at all. There were solos, vocal and pedal, by dozens of principals. All in all, every one within hearing distance agreed, Girstein had outdone himself. It was twelve-thirty before the curtain went down on a spectacle which presented twenty-five girls swinging on trapezes high in the air, tossing red roses to the buyers of orchestra stalls.

At last! cried Georgiana, as the silver screen descended.

After the usual announcement that the film had been passed by the Board of Censors, Ambrose read:

LOVE AND DANGER

from an original story by
Ambrose Deacon

prepared for the screen by
Philip Lawrence

He realized later that he had seen nothing more. Whether he had fainted, become entirely unconscious, or not, he never knew. He only awakened from his dazed condition to see Auburn Six being dragged across the stage by Martell Hallam to the accompaniment of cheers. Griesheimer followed with a speech in which he eulogized Ambrose in terms which the latter did not feel could be applicable to any one living. Finally, a spot-light settled on his face and he was obliged to stand to acknowledge the applause.

His way out of the theatre was continuously blocked by smiling faces and extended hands. Harold Edwards halted him to demand, When do I get a

new play? Marna Frost hoped he would now devote his talents exclusively to further the development of the Pueblo Indian. Philip Lawrence whispered cynically, You've got the boobs going, kid. Anything you want you can have now. Imperia smiled imperially as she remarked sweetly, I picked you, didn't I, Ambrose? Don't you think you owe me something in return? Capa Nolin contented herself with winking broadly. Herbert Ringrose and Livermore Bode spoke as if the Judgment Day had been successfully filmed. And these, and many more acquaintances, were abetted by ever so many strangers, film-folk and towns-folk, who wished to shake the great man's hand and thus partake of the mystic celebration.

Ambrose was obdurate in his refusal to attend a party to be given in his honour at the Montmartre. Georgiana, surprisingly, made no effort to compel him to go. So, at last, they made their escape from this raucous medley of personalities, this group of indissoluble egos, and drove back in silence to the Ambassador. The floor of their suite was piled high with boxes of flowers. Some that had been delivered without wrappers were already in vases. They were scarcely more than aware of this phenomenon when a boy delivered a sheaf of telegrams.

Ambrose opened the first one. It read:

Love and Danger is the world's most exalting message to humanity today stop I have viewed it and reviewed it each time with increasing awe stop it seems to me more than an achievement by man alone stop mere congratulations are not adequate to express appreciation of such artistic work stop in all my years of experience I never have witnessed such a triumph

Abie Girstein

Silently passing this benign message on to Georgiana he sighed as he slit a second envelope. The contents read:

Please wire two thousand word story your triumph tonight stop your own terms Editor New York Times

A third:

I knew you could do it stop offer you double for next story

Griesheimer

A fourth:

Come and see me tomorrow stop write your own contract

Lee Schwarzstein

Another:

You can do anything stop offer you job of manager my factory stop salary fifty thousand to begin Abel Morris

Georgiana made a gesture of distaste.

Don't open any more of those beastly things, she

cried. I can't bear it. . . . It was absolutely rotten, this film of yours. I was ashamed of you.

A very real happiness shone in Ambrose's eyes.

I don't know, he replied. I didn't see it. I didn't see anything. I must have been unconscious.

But you wrote it, she insisted, and the story was just as bad as the photography and the acting.

No, I didn't, Billie! he protested. I don't even know what the damn thing's about.

Then, nearly as embarrassed, probably, as Tess of the D'Urbervilles confessing her past to Angel Clare on their wedding night, Ambrose sat down beside Georgiana, clasped her hand between his palms and stammered out the whole history of his fabulous moving picture career.

At the close, she felt compelled to make a remark which had already been spoken in the same connection: I've got to hand it to you, kid! Further, she smiled contentedly and patted his cheek lovingly as she went on: You don't know what a relief this is to me, Ambrose. You see I know now that you haven't sullied your real self, destroyed your artistic soul.

I've taken money under false pretences. I'll return it! Ambrose cried.

You'll do nothing of the kind. . . . Georgiana was stern. . . . Haven't they used your name? I

guess that's worth the paltry sum they're throwing to you. Besides everybody takes money under false pretences out here. Do you think Griesheimer actually earns nine hundred thousand dollars a year? It's just part of the tradition of the place. Do you know, she went on musingly, I really love it!

Love what?

Dear old Hollywood. It's as sentimental and naïve as old Heidelberg, I imagine. I like almost everybody out here. They're all charming. And if they behave differently here from the way they would behave anywhere else in the world they can blame it on the California climate.

You don't want to stay here now, Ambrose protested in some alarm.

Not really stay here, she reassured him, but *now* I could. They're all so simple and childish and sweet and the way they throw money around — remember that lovely gold tea-service Imperia sent us — is too delightful, and everything's boosted and nothing is criticized. If I didn't have you, I think I'd stay here! I just love it!

Darling, Ambrose murmured wistfully, I didn't think anybody would ever care for me. How did you happen to?

I don't know, Ambrose. . . . She was dancing

about the room now. . . . I think I told you once it was a front-page complex. You are a celebrity of the very first water and I adore celebrities.

But you might have found a handsomer one.

Well then, if you must know, it's because you're a woojums!

She embraced him. Presently she seated herself across the arm of his chair and began to twist his ear.

Darling Billie, Ambrose declared, I'm tired of crowds and success and fame and *all* this stuff. Let's go away somewhere where we can be alone just with each other. Let's go to Cambodia. Have you ever heard of Angkor Wat? It's the most marvellous temple in the world, all alone by itself in the midst of an uninhabited jungle. Thousands and thousands of bas-reliefs carved on the walls. Let's . . .

Ambrose Deacon, you must be mad! . . . Georgiana sat up straight and regarded him intently. . . . *Now, at the height of your fame,* go to Cambodia! You're going straight back to New York to write another play to show what a great man you are. Besides, she went on, I want to meet George Gershwin and Jimmie Walker and Percy Hammond and Mencken and Alfred Lunt and Theodore Dreiser and Fred Astaire and Carl Van Vechten and Paul

Robeson and Scott Fitzgerald and Gene Tunney and . . . Cambodia! Why, we might as well live in Kansas City!

Ambrose Deacon groaned.

January 27, 1928
New York.

The Work of CARL VAN VECHTEN

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